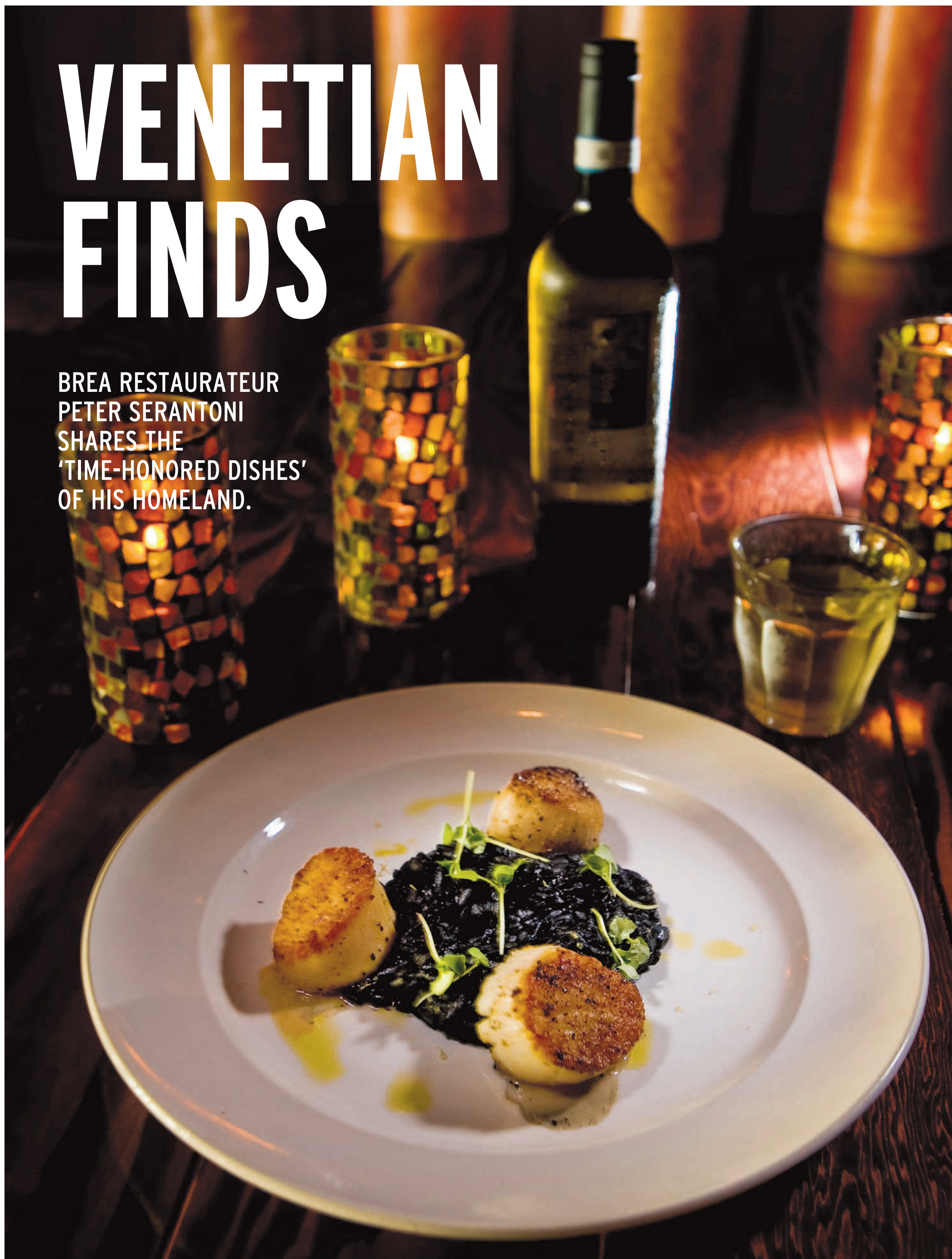


# VENETIAN FINDS

BREA RESTAURATEUR PETER SERANTONI SHARES THE 'TIME-HONORED DISHES' OF HIS HOMETLAND.



PHOTOS: PAUL RODRIGUEZ, ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Classic Venetian dishes, such as risotto nero con capesante, exemplify the freshness of ingredients required to capture the cuisine's traditional aspects.

**G**iancarlo Verdica told us that in Italy everything good is possible, soothing our nerves about a car rental glitch. Verdica, our Venetian guide, offered his songlike take on Italian-style positive thought, a state of mind that he said is derived from his Venetian lineage. His ancestors, he proclaimed, have lived in Venice for more than 600 years.

He closed his philosophical oration with a sentence in hushed tones, offering one more reason not to worry. After all, he said quietly, we have the pope.

He was right about the momentary travel problem. It evaporated like steam atop hot linguine.

Our summer vacation included a cruise that began and ended in Venice. Along with my husband, Phil, and four dear friends, we savored the time spent in the uniquely magical city that sits amid the tidal waters of the Adriatic.

We took in the Venice Biennale, the legendary summer-to-fall exhibition of global contemporary artwork, an event that is held every other year. We experienced the beauty of the city's historic sights and walked the sun-soaked maze of streets and bridges. And, of course, we ate.

As Verdica explained during his not-to-fret lecture, Venetians have well-defined priorities. Food and conviviality rank high on the list.

My previous journeys to Venice verify food's high ranking, most notably in 1983 when I studied in the kitchen of the city's famed Cipriani Hotel. It was there that I first tasted hoity-toity versions of traditional specialties of the Veneto. Many showcased fresh seafood; *risotto alla seppie*, the creamy risotto made midnight black with the addition of cuttlefish ink; *brodo di pesce*, the fish soup that is often flavor-boosted with saffron; *bigoli alle vongole*, thick, hollow spaghetti-like pasta spiked with clams and red chili flakes.

I learned how to grill Treviso radicchio, the bright-but-bitter magenta leaves tamed by careful attention to the flame. I sipped Prosecco, the sparkling wine of the region, and discovered that the deep red juice served in the dining room at breakfast wasn't made from tomatoes. It was blood orange juice, a new-to-me treat 30 years ago.

When I returned home after this summer's two weeks of feasting, I hungered for more.

I longed for the convivial joy as well as the flavors, aromas and textures. So I contacted Venetian restaurateur Peter Serantoni, co-owner of Brunos Trattoria (and Cha Cha's Latin Kitchen) in Brea. Would he cook some of my favorite dishes of the Veneto and share the recipes? He said yes.

He called them "time-honored dishes." I visited Brunos' kitchen,



Peter Serantoni, co-owner of Brunos Trattoria in Brea, prepares some classic Venetian dishes.

where Serantoni prepared three irresistible Venetian-style entrees and a warm doughnut-like dessert accompanied with lemon zabaglione for dipping.

As he cooked, I peppered him with questions, asking about growing up in Venice and his work experiences in America. For the most part, Serantoni's childhood home was an apartment just steps away from Venice's Basilica San Marco, an apartment he still owns and visits. He lived there with his father, chef-mentor Bruno Serantoni, and his two grandmothers.

One grandmother, Nonna Maria Serantoni, was the home cook. Often he would accompany her as she walked to the Rialto

market to buy groceries, sometimes two times a day to ensure that ingredients were super fresh for lunch and dinner. He explained that her dishes were tied to the seasons and were traditional rather than experimental, some requiring ingredients that had a very short window of availability.

Serantoni came to the U.S. at 19 to work as a chef. After more than a decade of experience, he came to Orange County to work at restaurants, memorable but now closed, such as the Bouzy Rouge, Newport Beach, and Chanteclair, Irvine.

Now he refers to himself as a restaurateur. Christian De La Vara is chef de cuisine at Brunos.

But I think at his core, Serantoni is still a chef.

I asked him what he pines for most about Venice. He said that he misses "the family place, kids playing soccer in the streets, and generations of families sitting around cafes eating and talking. The fresh smell of laundry hanging in alleys and courtyards, the sounds and smells of a vibrant city filled with food and socialization."

He said Venice is a completely unique city.

"Prague looks like Moscow. But Venice looks like Venice."



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Pan-roasted branzino is served with oven-roasted red potatoes and sautéed baby spinach.

PHOTOS: PAUL RODRIGUEZ, ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

## BRANZINO A LA VENEZIANA

Branzino is a Mediterranean sea bass with shimmery silver skin. Other skin-on filets can be substituted, such as red snapper, striped sea bass or black bass. The fish is accompanied with sautéed baby spinach and roasted red potatoes.

The quartered red potatoes are tossed with olive oil, peeled garlic cloves, salt, pepper and finely chopped fresh rosemary; they are spread on a rimmed baking sheet and roasted in a 400-degree oven until tender and nicely browned, about 25 minutes.

Yield: 6 servings

**2 1/2 pounds branzino skin-on filets, see cook's notes**

**Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste**

**1 cup all-purpose flour**

**3/4 cup olive oil**

**6 tablespoons finely diced shallots**

**6 tablespoons olive oil**

**12 caperberries, cut into 1/4-inch slices**

**1 lemon, cut into "supremes" (peeled sections), see cook's notes**

**2 tablespoons coarsely chopped Italian parsley**

**2 1/4 cups fish broth, see cook's notes**

**For serving: oven-roasted potatoes**

**For serving: sautéed baby spinach**

**Cook's notes:** If you prefer, use whole branzino. Each will be about 12 to 14 ounces. Make sure that fish is clean including the cavity (make sure no blood is left in the cavity). Dry with paper towels. Rub with olive oil and season well with salt and pepper. Bake in preheated 400-degree oven about 8 to 10 minutes (again key is not to overcook).

Caperberries are the fruit of a caper bush. Capers are the tiny buds of the same bush. Both are sold pickled. Caperberries are oblong and about the size of a grape. They are sold in jars.

To cut citrus into supremes, cut top and bottom off citrus, making those two cuts parallel to each other and cutting just below white pith. Place cut-side down on work surface. Cut off peel and pith in strips about 1-inch wide, starting at the top of the fruit and cutting down (following contour of shape). Working over bowl to collect juice, use a sharp small knife to cut parallel to one section's membrane, cut to center; turn knife and cut along the membrane on the other side of that section to remove it. Repeat until all sections are removed and cut from their membranes.

Chicken broth can be substituted for fish broth, but fish broth is preferred.

### Procedure:

1. Season filet with salt and pepper. Lightly dredge with flour. Heat oil on medium-high in large, deep skillet. Place fish skin side down and reduce heat to medium-low to allow skin to get crisp. Turn and cook about 2 minutes, or just long enough to cook through (fish will be just barely opaque throughout - do not overcook or fish will be dry). Place fish on warm rimmed serving plates.

2. Add shallots and 6 tablespoons oil to skillet; cook 1 minute on medium-high heat. Add caperberries, lemon supremes, parsley and broth; bring to a boil on high heat. Boil until volume reduces by 25 percent. Place warm oven-roasted potatoes and sautéed spinach on each plate. Ladle broth around edge of plate. Serve.

**Wine suggestion:** Trebbiano di Soave

**Nutrition information (per serving):** 540 calories, 42 percent of calories from fat, 25 g fat, 3 g saturated fat, 55 mg cholesterol, 30 g carbohydrates, 41 g protein, 1140 mg sodium, 2.5 g fiber

**Source:** Peter Serantoni, co-owner of Brunos Trattoria, Brea

## FRITTOLE WITH LEMON ZABAGLIONE

Yield: 6 servings

**1/3 cup Grappa liqueur**

**5 ounces golden raisins**

**2/3 cup (5 fluid ounces) whole milk**

**1/2 ounce (12 grams) dry active yeast**

**4 cups minus 2 tablespoons (18 ounces) all-purpose flour**

**1/2 cup minus 1 teaspoon (3 ounces) sugar**

**Finely grated zest of 1 lemon (colored portion of peel)**

**1 ounce finely grated candied orange peel**

**1 pinch kosher salt**

**4 large eggs**

**3 ounces pine nuts**

**2/3 cup minus 1 teaspoon (5 fluid ounces) Grappa liqueur**

**Canola oil**

**Powdered sugar as needed**

**For serving: Lemon Zabaglione, recipe below**

### Procedure:

- In a small bowl combine Grappa and raisins; set aside and allow to soak overnight. Strain, reserving Grappa.
- Heat milk to 90 degrees in small saucepan. Remove from heat and add yeast; shake handle to combine. Dissolve yeast. Sift flour and sugar into a large bowl; stir in lemon zest, candied orange peel and salt. Mix in the eggs one by one, stirring to combine between additions. Add the milk/yeast mixture and grappa leftover from soaking the raisins; stir to combine. Cover with plastic wrap and let rise 1 hour in warm location.
- To dough, add pine nuts, the 2/3 cup minus 1 teaspoon of grappa and raisins; gently mix to combine. Cover with plastic wrap and let rest an additional 40 minutes.
- In a deep pot or Dutch oven, heat 2-inches of canola oil to 350 degrees (test with a deep fat thermometer). Place a rimmed baking sheet lined with paper towels next to stove. Cautiously spoon dough (approximately 1 1/2 ounces each) into hot oil with a medium spoon; spheres will be approximately 1 to 1 1/8 inch in diameter). Fry frittole until golden brown and crispy; drain on paper towels for 1 to 2 minutes. Serve warm. Sprinkle with powdered sugar if desired. Serve with lemon zabaglione for dipping.

**Nutrition information (per serving):** 305 calories, 40 percent of calories from fat, 13 g fat, 4 g saturated fat, 38 mg cholesterol, 39 g carbohydrates, 8 g protein, 58 mg sodium, 0.8 g fiber

**Source:** Peter Serantoni, co-owner of Brunos Trattoria, Brea



Frittole with lemon zabaglione is a doughnut-like dessert with a lemony dipping sauce.

## LEMON ZABAGLIONE

Yield: 2 cups, about 6 to 8 servings

**3 large egg yolks**

**2 large whole eggs**

**1 cup sugar**

**1 cup fresh lemon juice**

**1/4 cup (2 fluid ounces) limoncello liqueur**

**7 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into small pieces**

### Procedure:

- In a stainless-steel bowl, place yolks, whole eggs, sugar, juice and liqueur. Whisk to combine. Set bowl over large saucepan of gently simmering water (do not allow bottom of bowl to touch water). Whisk constantly until mixture becomes thick and foamy, 3 to 5 minutes (do not overheat, eggs will curdle). Remove from heat (but keep over the hot water); whisk in butter a little at a time. Continue to whisk until creamy. Serve warm or cold.

**Nutrition information (per serving):** 220 calories, 50 percent of calories from fat, 12 g fat, 5 g saturated fat, 58 mg cholesterol, 20 g carbohydrates, 5 g protein, 359 mg sodium, 0.5 g fiber

**Source:** Peter Serantoni, co-owner of Brunos Trattoria, Brea

## Cathy Thomas talks

Register columnist and cookbook author **Cathy Thomas** will discuss her most recent book, "**50 Best Plants on the Planet: The Most Nutrient Dense Fruits and Vegetables,**" on Sept. 18 at noon at the Huntington Beach Central Library, 7111 Talbert Ave. Book sales and signings after the program. Fee: \$20. Reservations are requested by Monday. Info: Friends of the Library, **714-375-8429**.



Fegato alla Veneziana with polenta bianca will turn liver haters into liver lovers.

## FEGATO (VEAL LIVER) ALLA VENEZIANA

You might think that liver is disgusting. But liver haters become liver lovers when they discover how it is cooked in Venice. It is sautéed, then sliced and tossed with caramelized onions that are spiked with vinegar. On our vacation, Phil ordered it one night and gave samples to our friends.

The next night two of our friends ordered it.

Yield: 6 servings

**2 1/4 pounds veal liver, see cook's notes**

**Milk for soaking liver**

**Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste**

**1 cup all-purpose flour**

**6 teaspoons extra virgin olive oil**

**Onion mixture, see cook's notes**

**6 tablespoons coarsely chopped Italian parsley**

**For serving: blocks of white polenta, drizzled**

**Garnish: extra-virgin olive oil for drizzling**

**Cook's notes:** For onion mixture: Heat 1/2 cup olive oil in a large deep skillet on medium-high heat. Add 1 1/2 pounds (peeled, sliced 1/8-inch thick) Vidalia onion (yellow skinned sweet onions). Reduce heat to low and add 1 cup water; cook until soft and translucent, stirring occasionally. Add 1 1/8 cups white balsamic vinegar, 2 1/4 teaspoons kosher salt and 2 1/4 teaspoons freshly ground black pepper. Simmer approximately 5 minutes on medium heat, or until onions have absorbed 1/3 of liquid; set

aside. If you prefer, you can use red wine vinegar. Taste the mixture; if it is too acidic, add a little sugar.

### Procedure:

- Clean liver well, removing all skin and veins (ideally purchase pre-cleaned and sliced veal liver from butcher shop); place in nonreactive pan and cover with milk; refrigerate overnight.
- Pat liver dry and cut into 1/2-inch wide slices. Season with salt and pepper; lightly dredge in flour. Heat oil in large deep skillet on medium-high heat; add liver in single layer and briefly sauté liver slices on both sides, leaving the liver nicely seared on the outside and rare on the inside; cut liver crosswise into strips that are about 1/2-inch wide and place on a platter.
- Heat onion mixture in same skillet. When piping hot, add liver and toss well. Add parsley and toss; divide between plates. Serve with grilled white polenta. Drizzle polenta with a little extra-virgin olive oil.

**Wine suggestion:** Barbaresco

**Nutrition information (per serving):** 688 calories, 58 percent of calories from fat, 44 g fat, 8 g saturated fat, 86 mg cholesterol, 31 g carbohydrates, 40 g protein, 1260 mg sodium, 2.0 g fiber

**Source:** Peter Serantoni, co-owner of Brunos Trattoria, Brea