

Peloton



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A MONUMENT TO LIFE

BIKES, BEEF & STRADE BIANCHE

WORDS: CHRIS COSENTINO



Chef Cosentino (below) and Dario Cecchini (right).



The idea of being able to go back to Tuscany was inspiring. Besides cooking and eating, I'd be butchering with fellow chef Dario Cecchini and having dinner with an Olympic gold medalist before watching and riding Strade Bianche. A first highlight, in Florence, was finding the most amazing street cart, whose proprietress Beatrice, I later learned, had worked for Dario for years. She was singing Madonna's "Material Girl" while making panini. Her sign read: "I will not cut the sandwich; it makes a mess; get your own."

That first night, we hatched a plan to ride from Florence to Panzano in Chianti to surprise my friend Dario at his butcher shop, a 50-mile round trip. We would ride past olive groves, vineyards and ornate private gardens, all flanked by cypress trees. I learned that their roots go straight down and that's why they line the roads and graveyards—cypresses don't destroy the roads or graves or interfere with whatever else is growing nearby.

The love of cycling is everywhere in Tuscany. At Greve in Chianti, we passed a giant statue of a cyclist. We climbed into Panzano, and I finally got to see Dario's establishment. As I put my head around the corner to say hello, Dario saw me, yelled my name and came running out to greet me—we would have time to talk a few days' later at a pre-arranged visit. Our return to Florence was up and down—and was it cold! I had the speed wobbles I was shaking so much. That night we dined at an iconic restaurant, the Osteria del Cinghiale Bianco, which specializes in *cucina povera*: the traditional dishes of Florence. We discussed the history of Florentine food, its unsalted bread and peposo, a dish also known as tilemaker's stew. Worlds collide over delicious

meals that everyone can enjoy, that is what makes food special; it transcends all boundaries: age, class, politics.

After a killer breakfast sandwich next day, there was time to visit the central market. The dried fruit stand was mind-blowing: cherry tomatoes, Tuscan melon, strawberries and the usual fruits. The melon and tomatoes were the winners for me and would be ride food for the next few days. We walked to a little blue fish shack that served seafood straight from their father's boat in Puglia: a delicious bacalao sandwich followed by one stuffed with octopus. I was overwhelmed with the beauty of Florence, the people, the art, the food, the clothes. It felt inspiring to be lost in the city's history while passing a sex-toy-and-condom vending machine beneath a fresco of the Virgin Mary, while a cannabis vending machine stood nearby like an American soda machine—but you won't see any of those here.

A beautiful car ride through the Chianti region on great windy roads took us to a historic castle, now a hotel, Castel Pietraio, outside Siena. We linked up with a group from Sportful, one



Images 2x: Chris Cosentino.

of the Strade Bianche sponsors, with whom we'd watch the pro race and ride the next day's gran fondo. We had a shake-out ride on the Friday with an amazing group that included Paolo Bettini (whose palmarès included three monuments, two rainbow jerseys and the Olympic road title) and his good mate Luca Paolini, a multiple cobbled classics winner.

We weaved through the hills of Tuscany on roads I'd only seen in the movies, riding past the burning of late-winter/early-spring vine clippings. At the top of a climb, in the walled commune of Casole d'Elsa, our lunch stop was on a narrow, cobbled street. After cinghiale salumi, fresh cheeses and great laughs we descended through blustering winds, passing the team buses of EF Education, Jumbo-Visma, Astana, Israel-Premier Tech and UAE, parked outside quiet hotels that allowed their riders to recon the Strada Bianca course.

That evening, we headed to Panzano again, to be with Dario for dinner and a butchering lesson. We took the wrong turn, but when I asked an old woman at the roadside for directions she pointed and said with authority "Dario!" His butcher shop, Antica Macelleria Cecchini, has passed through three generations of Cecchini's. People come from all over the world to see this magic butcher who has inspired me for years. I brought him two gifts: a pocketknife big enough for his giant hands and a special one-of-a-kind cleaver. He passed out glasses of chianti and crostini with lardo as we arrived.

On a brief tour, we spotted a small piece of cycling history, a plaque Dario made to celebrate Gino Bartoli, who was his father's great friend. Dario knew him from childhood and decided to honor his victory at the 1950 Giro di Toscana, a race Gino finished so plastered in mud they couldn't recognize him; the plaque is named *il muro di fango* ("the mud wall"). I was next in awe at Dario's butchering and aging facility, which is like his church—a church of hanging beef where the smell in the air is crisp and fresh. Dario chose a hind leg for us to butcher. I was now in the moment I'd wanted to be in for years. He was so graceful with the knife, gliding through fat, sinew and flesh with grace, explaining the whole process as his wife Kim translated. He handed me the knife, indicating I could finish. I desisted and asked if I could watch and learn. He quickly crafted the beef into cuts I'd never seen. I was overwhelmed with what I'd just learned. Back at his restaurant, Solociccia, dinner was a monumental experience for everyone, the textures, flavors and aromas intoxicating.

Strada day had an early start. By the time we got to Siena the women had started and the men's team buses were rolling in. After the presentation photos, and more photos, the car took us to our first sector of white roads. Pogačar fans were marching down the route with giant flags, a buzz of languages and excitement. A motorcade of police cars and motorcycles, ensuring the course was clear, was followed by the helicopters. We saw the dust kicked up by the race and then, boom, the



Chris with Paolo Bettini.



Images 7x: Chris Cosentino.

breakaway was followed by a technicolor blur of color, an explosion of sound, shifters clicking, carbon wheels humming, a mix of cheering, yelling and excitement as the peloton sped by like a locomotive. We were so close to the action, its smells and tastes of chain lube, sweat and dust all rolled into one.

On reaching a new sector, the climb of San Martino in Grania, news had spread of a massive crash. The winds were howling, it was cold, but the view was perfect. We ate alongside picnicking families; our cinghiale-and-cheese panini hit the spot. With the first sign of the dust cloud descending “our” white road, children screamed: “They’re coming!” After the break and peloton rolled through, and as folks started to pack up, the stragglers came along, weaving between the fans and local cars, either trying to reconnect with the peloton or calling it a day and taking a short cut to Siena.

We headed the same way to watch the finish in the Piazza del Campo, which has an amazing history. The Palio di Siena is a horse race dating back to 1232, now held twice a year in early July and mid-August. On those days, the town center is filled with a ring of dirt so horses and riders, bareback and dressed in colors representing 10 of Siena’s 17 districts, can race around the piazza watched by the thousands lining the course or spectating from restaurants. On Strade Bianche race day, the Piazza del Campo had a giant screen for the crowds to watch pro cyclists (not horses) race over different dirt.

It was down to three in the breakaway, with a chase group after them. Beer, wine and coffee was flowing in the Siena bars and cafés; the whoop-whoop of the helicopters grew louder as the race neared the city. Soon, the leaders were on Via Santa Caterina, the steep cobbled climb that heads into the center. Below us on the finish line the soigneurs were waiting for their riders. Packed with people, the Piazza del Campo was a roaring

frenzy. I was so close to the whoop-whoop-whoop over my head it was deafening. And suddenly there was Pogačar racing downhill from the last turn, hands above his head, followed by Valverde and then Asgreen.

I so wanted Valverde to be the one; at 42 he’s a true hero to us old guys watching him battling it out with the new generation. Second place was still amazing. As the riders collected in the paddock, Valverde pinched the cheek of winner Pogačar, a true touch of respect for the racer and this race. As the riders rolled in, the media wanted them, kids wanted them, doping control wanted them—for quotes, bidons, autographs or samples. It’d been a magical day for me. I was hoping it was for the racers too as they came home in waves, dusty, battered, hungry and now cold from stopping, looking for warm clothes.

Our dinner at a local pizza spot in Siena was so fun with the group because a whole slew of teenagers came to celebrate a birthday dressed in their best; we were all tired and ready to get back to the hotel for another early wake-up since Sunday was our turn to ride the white roads of Tuscany.

The start was early! Breakfast at 5 a.m. before getting dressed and driving half an hour into Siena, to find parking and get set up. We headed to the back of the start line; it was like 32 degrees, freezing cold. The buzz was electric among the 5,500 starters, with the front 500 racing for the championship series, which I didn’t even know existed. We were about to experience so much—the chaos to get to the front from the back, large groups somehow navigating around annoying road furniture, some great riding, some reckless riding and everything in between—and we hadn’t yet made it out of town. The roads and riding were beautiful. We were weaving between riders like Frogger just to keep a consistent pace as we slipped into a groove of finding the best lines through the hordes of riders. As we got

onto the smaller roads, each turn revealed a more beautiful view than the last, with rows of cypress trees, stunning Chianti vineyards, medieval castles and walled hilltop towns.

We passed a couple in their 70s riding with huge smiles on their faces and in no particular hurry, with locals on the side of the road cheering for the fondo riders just as they did for the pros. The mix of tarmac to gravel roads felt just like riding trails in Northern California at a Grasshopper, but I found my inability to speak Italian was making it hard on course, so I decided to whistle to pass other riders until I learned a few quick words. I kept saying what I think meant “left” when I tried to pass but it was getting me nowhere, so I returned to whistling.

This time it was me in the middle of the hum of carbon, click-click shifting, clattering of chains sliding through the gears and the crunch of white stones under our tires, a symphony of enjoyment. What was amazing was the very different styles of pace—casual riders stopped and met folks along the course who’d set up aid stations (more like picnics) for them; club teams with a faster pace; and folks on a mission to race as fast as possible. The roads were open to traffic but most of the cars coming through were from club teams, honking horns in a mad rush for a bottle hand-off or a wheel change; but it was a fondo not a race. As we completed the last sector, we knew there were only a few miles left before climbing the Via Santa Caterina, lined with folks cheering and yelling for us.



(L to R) Peloton Editor-in-Chief Brad Roe, videographer Michael Crook and Peloton Creative Director Tim Schamber.



Images 2x: Chris Cosentino.

After that last right turn, I could see the finish line in the Piazza del Campo. I saw the cafés filled people cheering for their families, friends and anyone else who thought riding Strade Bianche was a great idea. It is a great idea. What other sport gives you the opportunity to get right out there on the same exact course or field and do what the pros do? I mean, come on, when was the last time you and some friends get to toss a football in Levi’s Stadium or play a round of golf at Augusta National?

This is why I loved this moment of finishing a ride in a beautiful city with so much history and to realize how much more the bike gives me. It’s more than just a way to travel from point A to point B; it’s a vehicle into other places, other times, amazing people, delicious foods and, with every pedal stroke, you can be that kid again having the freedom to go on an adventure. The finishers were all given a medal before we headed out looking for hot coffee and food, all while trying to enjoy a few moments to take it all in. The sounds of congratulations, laughter, excitement and exhaustion all rolled into one as people high-fived, grabbed beers or just plopped down to savor a great day.

Life is a like a race with an ending that isn’t always great for TV. You get only one chance at this classic race called life; some moments are fast and supposed to be, but just make sure no matter how fast you choose to go that you take it all in and enjoy the moment. Remember, it’s not about the destination it’s about enjoying the ride to get there. *Pm*

You can now watch a documentary of this adventure on OutsideTV.com titled, “Chris Rides Off The Menu.”