

## Tasting Italy in a Prague Courtyard

### Quade Young

It was one of those perfect spring days in Prague. Sun out, no wind, warm enough to sit still without needing a jacket. We sat around a wooden picnic table in the middle of our university courtyard - me, a few classmates, and my travel writing professor. My professor brought a chef who used to have his own Italian restaurant here in Prague, and is now retired, kind of. These days he only does takeout, mostly for locals who know how good he is. He talked us through every dish, explaining the ingredients, the regions they came from, and why they mattered. I was already starving when the first plate hit the table.

The **Caponata** came out first. Soft chunks of eggplant, a glossy tomato base, and little bits of olive and capers tucked in. I scooped up a forkful and the first thing that hit me was sweetness. Not like dessert sweet, but just enough sugar to surprise you. Then, maybe two chews in, it hits you. Salty olives, tangy capers, a little heat tucked into the background. The texture was soft and jammy but not quite mushy. Turns out it's a classic from Sicily, and the chef said the dish comes from North African influence. It was the kind of dish that made you pause between bites, trying to figure out how something so simple could taste that layered.

Then came the **Melanzane Ripiene**, grilled eggplant slices wrapped into these tight little rolls, stuffed with creamy ricotta, sun dried tomatoes, parmesan, and basil. The first bite was all sweetness from the tomato, sticky and rich, like it had been soaking up the sun all day. Then came the ricotta, smooth and rich against the soft, grilled eggplant. The Parmesan added this sharp, salty punch that pulled everything together. The basil brought it back down to earth.. Sweet, cheesy, herby, and somehow still light. I slowed down eating this one. Not because I wasn't hungry, but because it felt like something I didn't want to rush.

Next, the chef handed us a slice of **Frittata**. The color was vibrant, and the texture had that airy, bouncy look to it, like quiche. I took a bite and instantly got hit with this fresh, almost grassy flavor. He said it was made with lovage, an herb I'd never heard of before. It tasted like a cross between parsley and celery but stronger, almost peppery. The texture was the wild part. It was soft and eggyish, like a sponge cake. It soaked up the flavor of the herbs in a way that made it feel like something you'd eat in a garden with your hands still dirty from picking vegetables.

Just when I thought I was full, **Tiramisu** appeared on the table. It looked like classic tiramisu layers of cream and coffee-soaked ladyfingers, dusted cocoa on top. I took a spoonful and it was exactly what I wanted. Creamy, cold, and perfectly balanced between bitter espresso and sweet mascarpone. But then something new, this little crunch at the end. Crushed coffee beans mixed into the top layer. Every bite ended with this clean, roasted bitterness that kept me going back for more even after I swore I was done.

By the end, we were all sitting back in our seats, not talking much, just letting it settle. It wasn't a restaurant meal. There were reservations, just one menu, a guy who knew food, a table of hungry people, and the kind of sunshine that makes everything taste better. I didn't expect a full

tour of Italy in the middle of Prague, but somehow that's exactly what it was. Just a plate, a fork, and an italian inspired chef who knows what they're doing in the kitchen. That's more than enough.