



# La Subida: A voyage through time

STORY by ALESSANDRA PIUBELLO  
PHOTOGRAPHS by SOFIE DELAUW

***The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in seeing old landscapes with new eyes.***

Marcel Proust

Come, let me take your hand. I'll show you a unique dream world, suspended in a space and time that seems surreal. It's a Shangri-La with deep roots in the Friuli soil, an Eden of Slovenian tradition that renews and re-energises; an immersion in the pleasure of genuine flavours, of contemplation within woodland surroundings and play in close contact with nature. Curious to know where we are going? Just a little more patience, Time is the lord of magical places...

## Cormòns

Yes, that's right. We are in the Collio Friulano region. A luminous sun-filled landscape, dotted with vines, bell towers and churches, archaeological ruins and forest. The hills here were drawn by a generous Mother Nature, who is well-loved by its inhabitants. From the hilltops, Renaissance panoramas are a feast for the eyes, and it's easy to become enchanted by the expressive force of the sea in the distance. The Collio area, automatically associated with wine, is so much more. It's a meeting point between culture, history and legend.

Lying at the foot of Mount Quarin, the origins of Cormòns go back to Celtic times. It lies in the heart of the Collio Goriziano area, between mountains, as the word suggests (although the name is probably derived from the totemic animal of the Gaelic tribes: the weasel, called 'carmo'). The city, in this landscape of bucolic colours, is characterised by an elegant town centre with graceful palazzi and churches with a marked Hapsburg atmosphere. It's only three kilometres to the border with Slovenia, one of the few nations in the world that has created a national festival day dedicated to culture, celebrating the anniversary of its most important poet, France Prešeren. He penned 'The Toast' (*Zdravljica*), the national Slovenian anthem that proposes a toast to all the peoples of the world, that they might freely overcome their disagreements and recognise friends in others.

## La Subida and Joško Sirk

Beyond the town centre, it's only a few kilometres to the La Subida Eden, a place to contemplate infinity. Your first steps take you through a gate with the traditional *concolada* stones underfoot. A well, a Karst monolith where one can make a wish, is the entry to the Sirk realm. Carved animals and a century-old linden tree watch over the house, surrounded by forest. A boy chasing a hoop is a symbol that doesn't go unnoticed. A few more steps and you're inside, ensconced by a veranda with large windows, an outpost between fields and forest, warm with terracotta, soft carpets and a modern fireplace; covered by a sloping roof in natural wood. Two bright blue eyes and a frank and vigorous handshake

welcome you. His is a firm, unyielding gaze. How much life these sixty year-old pupils must have seen, hypnotic as a vortex of powerful energy. He walks like someone used to scaling mountains, while his smile ripples with innate reserve. 'The man of the forest' is a living legend in these parts, and beyond. Joško Sirk has many stories to tell, but he doesn't always want to tell them. He exudes authenticity, a visceral person who sometimes prefers his free-flowing thoughts on the back of a powerful motorbike than to speak of himself. But Joško opens the doors of his house and his life to us. He leads us into another room, that of the restaurant. There is an old piano at the entrance, a wooden bar covered with vintage objects, white tables in the centre with *Cividale* ceramics; we sit on the woven straw chairs in front of a crackling fire, ready to hear his story. There is a series of coffee grinders on the mantelpiece; before the fire hypnotises us completely, he begins to speak.

"My mother, who died at 106 years-old, gave birth to me when she was 50. My father, after three daughters, had given up hope. I was born in Cormòns to an ethnic Slovenian family. They left the city of Višnjevik in 1947, after the Treaty of Paris. They didn't want to stay in Communist Yugoslavia and so moved here. My mother's family came from a long line of tavern owners, while my father's family were peasants (stubborn and headstrong, I inherited it from somewhere now, didn't I?) In 1950 they opened a bar with a tobacconist and a *trattoria*. In 1969 my father died, and at the age of sixteen I was left to carry on the business. Running a tavern was like passing an exam. It has happened several times in my life, in sectors connected to my profession, to start down a path without the base knowledge and then throw myself into it, body and soul, to understand and master it, until I am ready to move on to a new challenge." Joško instinctively listens to his internal demons. He follows his intuition and foresight like the slightly mad visionary he is. He seems constantly a step ahead of the rest, a forerunner of the times to come. He uses creativity in his strategy to make plans concrete.

In the 1980s he achieved "a dream that at the beginning I wouldn't have dared dream", the Subida project: a philosophy of well-being that is also a

lifestyle. Hospitality and sport (swimming, tennis, trekking and horseback riding) are joined by wine and food in this oasis of peace, far from the stress and daily grind of modern life. This practical and gruff man (they call him the bear of La Subida) is in reality a romantic Don Quixote and a dreamer ahead of his time. Volcanic and stubborn, a rebel with a cause, he shakes up the community where he lives, pursuing risks through to the end. He founded the Piccolo Collio association to promote enogastronomy within the local area (his idea to equip all local tourist accommodations with yellow Vespas ended up on the pages of the New York Times). Then there was Ollio, a project to promote local olive cultivars unique to the Collio groves, highlighting the culture and quality of the local extra virgin olive oil. Joško has many strong points (you could write a book about his life), but the strongest is his passionate defence of gastronomic traditions and recipes drawn from tradition. As Lalla Romano wrote, “to love tradition is to love the future”.

## The family

Loredana, Joško's wife. Tanjia, with her husband Alessandro, and Mitja, his children. Theirs is the sincere embrace of a family ready to welcome you with open arms and innate *savoir faire* and spontaneity. It's the warmth of a family that makes you feel at home, fulfilling your wishes before you have even spoken them. “Love passes through the stomach,” says a Slovenian proverb. Here they know how to treat you like royalty, with a generosity of spirit and endless charm.

## Alessandro Gavagna, the La Subida restaurant chef

He came to Joško when he was twenty-three years-old, seventeen years ago. Friulano know-how is in everything he does with ancient local recipes. Joško dictates the style of cooking, and the menu must rigorously be at least 50% traditional with the other half more interpretative cooking, but always based on the traditions and produce of the region. Any new dishes are tested personally by him.



“Our culinary history,” says Alessandro, “has its origins in Austro-Hungarian culture. It has given us a unique gastronomic style that has remained intact over time, completely different from Mediterranean cooking.”

His is sober cooking, faithful to its roots, based on fresh and genuine local produce that recall the flavours of times gone by. It's a past that dialogues harmoniously with the present, a tradition cloaked in modernity. It's a clear interpretation, without bells or whistles, which reflects the character of the people who live here, simple, but rich in humanity. In a region that has always been at an inevitable and, at times, painful crossroads, a natural meeting point between the Latin, Germanic and Slavic worlds, cooking here is a dictionary written in many languages, translated into dishes that are transformed magically into Esperanto. Alessandro has managed to create a synthesis of all this, ‘kneading’ history, reinterpreting, lightening

and giving new dignity to dishes from historically ‘poor’ origins. These are recipes that have been refined and caressed, preserving the integrity of their original character. Food here is history and culture, memory and taste, a ritual and symbolic concept, but also the method for better understanding the identity of diverse cultures and their experiences of integration.

Among the recipes published here, let's take the example of *Mlinci*, a typical Slovenian dish. It's a dough made of flour (also corn flour) and eggs, rolled thin, cut into irregular squares and lightly toasted on the grill. Accompanied with vegetables and rabbit ragout, Friulano-style, it's a contemporary compendium of cultural flavours. Irresistible for its essential simplicity, perfectly calibrated in taste. Each single ingredient is neatly defined, and the whole is melodious when put together. It's a pure expression of Alessandro's mastery of ingredients, also seen in the ‘Girini’ with the first shoots of green and wild flowers. In this re-interpretation of *pasta buttata*, moulded into teardrop shapes, you can taste the rhythmic and harmonious interplay of acidic, sweet and bitter flavours.

The guinea fowl with sculpit, and venison fillet with red blueberries: compact, appetising and tender, underline the connection with the gastronomy of the past. Like Joško, Alessandro has travelled throughout Italy and around the world, eating at the tables of the best chefs (as well as having worked with Walter Eynard at Filetto, Davide Scabin at Combalzero, Igles Corelli and abroad in the Ducasse school). Not by accident, Gianni Cosetti, the living memory of typical Friulano flavours, decided to organise his retirement dinner at La Subida and gave Alessandro the legendary recipes of the evening as a gift. Not by accident the most talented and innovative chefs in the world have come here for the second edition of “Cook it Raw” (the only Italian restaurant of the tour).



Lo Chef Alessandro Gavagna



## The cellar at La Subida

Dinner one evening in 1972. Luigi Soini, the manager of the Cantina di Cormòns, is dining with other producers from the town. Soini complained: the wine is not up to the standards of the food. That same Soini is the man who produced the Wine of Peace in 1983, planting 540 varieties of vines from all over the world in Cormòns in a World Vineyard. He made a white wine that was sent each year to every civil and religious leader in the world. Joško, piqued by his critique, began to attend the courses of the Italian Sommeliers Association, becoming a regional representative. He translated the textbooks into Slovenian and became passionate about the subject. He began to know the local and regional producers, encouraging and supporting them. He believed from the beginning that red wines should be left in the cellar to age. He knew that wine is complex and refuted the rigid point schemes, creating instead an intimate and personal relationship with the “aromatic liquid”. In his well-stocked cellar dedicated to Friuli Venezia Giulia, with a section reserved

for Slovenian wines, there is a buried amphora, personally given to his son, Mitja, by the winemaker Joško Gravner himself; when he was 13 to 18 years-old, Joško’s son also made wine.

Reading the carefully crafted wine list, largely regional, but with some Slovenian ‘intruders’, it is interesting to note how many labels there are, as well as the depth of vintages offered. But there is a detail that stands out. Before the name of the vineyard and the name of the wine, there is the name of the producer. The person takes first position, not the vineyard or wine, in true Sirk style. A section is dedicated to “my winemaker friends” with a few lines describing each.

## The vinegar cellar

A flash of black and white. Baba-Jaga, the mythological witch, holds a magnum of Sirk vinegar in her arms as if it was a child. It’s an image from the imagination of Maurizio Frullani. In a certain sense, Joško’s mission to resurrect grape vinegar recalls something ancestral and fairytale-like about it. It’s inspiring to hear him talk about it in his modern vinegar cellar built in 2006 next to the vineyards of Ribolla grapes that are used for the vinegar. He takes us into the wooden building among the barrels housed on different levels. “They’re on varying levels, as if it was a vineyard,” he says. “Mine is a new interpretation. I begin with the best Collio grapes to make a quality vinegar.”

Another challenge, the latest, for this man who is always searching for new solutions to his creative ideas.



## The Osteria

It began in 1983 when the bar area that was previously in the trattoria was moved here. In the March of that year it was completely renovated. On two levels with a lot of wood and luminous colours, it is the ideal place for a relaxing snack and glass of wine. On the walls there are several sayings and proverbs in Italian, Friulian and Slavonic, collected by Joško (one of which is reproduced at the beginning of this article).

It’s amusing to see the irony of Joško the huntsman. For him hunting is important, even if he lives it as if it were a rollicking frat party. In the hunting room at La Subida, there are glass cabinets with stuffed animals he has caught, trophies of memorable moments. At the Osteria, however, the irony is more evident. He hung the first deer he ever caught, painted with bright colours; the face of a majestic mountain sheep with horns is covered with small white roses, and as a final touch, a fake red rose in its mouth. “There’s a hint that I want to distance myself from the hunting family,” he smiles under his moustache.



### The houses in the woods

A sense of peace and harmony with nature pervades the walk through the woods to reach the houses, set in a rustic farming village. The silence is dense and palpable; the air is green and resinous in our nostrils. Underfoot, there is the red *flysch*, the typical earth of Cormòns. Stepping into any of the dozens of houses set up to grant it's visitors enchanted evenings is its own experience. Every apartment is unique, designed with careful attention paid to every detail, a special getaway. Waking in this magical atmosphere after a sound sleep in the former hay barn, the *kazolek* of wood cut by a winter moon, is unforgettable.

### The importance of wild herbs in the La Subida kitchen

A spring morning with a tepid March sun. Walking through the countryside, through fallow fields and along the stream banks, climbing through poplar woods and brambles, Alessandro takes us on a hunt for herbs. When he was a boy, his grandmother took him to gather spring greens and young shoots, teaching him how to find them, recognise them and love their bitter taste. For hundreds of thousands of years human beings have lived on wild herbs. Knowledge of the natural world and plants based on experience, and passed down orally, was fundamental. No one wants to end like the protagonist of *Into the Wild*, directed by Sean Penn, based on the true story of Christopher McCandless, who died after eating a poisonous herb that he mistakenly identified from a photo! La Subida's cuisine is light and fresh with respect to the ancient Friulano tradition, and makes the quality of the herbs even more evident. Alessandro adds to particular varieties a pinch of playful imagination and careful attention to detail. Some of the delicious herbs from his recipes:

#### **Wild asparagus, also known as *sparasina* or *sparg salvadi***

It grows in the woods and on the Karst heath, on the hills and in dry, sunny, limestone-rich areas together with other heat-loving plants. In Collio it also grows on Mount Medea and Mount Quarin. In the Karst area, the widespread harvest of wild asparagus is recent, beginning just after the Second World War. Previously it was done prevalently in the areas of Breg that border with Istria. After the war, the harvest satisfied not only local consumption, but was also sold at farmers' markets. In spring, shoots growing at the base of the plant are gathered and used like other kinds of asparagus. They are greatly appreciated for their delicate flavour and distinctive, slightly bitter taste, particularly suited to frittata.





### **Hops or bruscandolo or urtisons**

Hop plants grow wild in hedges and at the edges of woods, an invasive weed. The leaves and young shoots are harvested early in spring and are prized for their aromatic flavour. This wild climber has been cultivated for centuries in Germany and North Europe, as it is a crucial ingredient in the production of beer. The female shoots are used for this purpose, as their gland produces lupulin with marked aromatic qualities that give beer its particular taste. Spring shoots are used in frittata. It can also be used cooked in various spring dishes (using the young and tender tips) such as salads, risotto, soups and broths. Hops boast an illustrious literary reputation. Ugo Foscolo, in the

*Last letters of Jacopo Ortis*, mentions bruscandolo, narrating the moment in which, on a May evening, broth with hop shoots was served in the afternoon, a typical peasant dish.

### **Tarragon**

Tarragon is known as *estragon* in France and *dragoncello* in Italy. Originally from Siberia, this herb is characterised by its elegant and penetrating aroma, used in many typical French dishes. It is an herbaceous plant with thin green pointed leaves and tiny spiked yellow flowers. The tender leaves and early shoots are harvested between spring and autumn, both used in cooking. Their fragrance enriches vinegar, oil and butter, gives character to sauces such as tartar and béarnaise, and pairs perfectly with seafood, meat (especially white meat) and egg dishes. The *pehtran* is a variety of tarragon typical to the Giulia Alps. It has velvety and sweet aromatic tones compared to common tarragon. In this area it is used traditionally to dress biscuits and sweets, such as *pehtranova potica*, a sweet roll that is filled with a tiny bit of ricotta and pehtran.

### **Silene (campion) or sclopit**

An herbaceous plant with tapered green leaves, known also as “silene rigonfia” or “Silenius’s herb”. The cup of its white and rose flowers recalls the prominent belly of Silenus, who, according to Greek mythology, was Dionysus’ tutor. The name apparently originates from this.

It grows widespread in fallow fields and grass, woods and at the borders of paths. It is used in traditional Friulian cooking, with the shoots harvested before flowering, and used in risotto, soups and frittata.

### **Dandelion, wild chicory, Lion’s tooth or thale**

The scientific name has ancient and uncertain origins, probably linked to the Persian *tharakhakon*, a bitter herb. It is widespread in grass lands, fields and at the edges of roads. The flowers open at dawn and close at sunset and for this reason it is called the

‘shepherd’s watch’ in some areas. It flowers mainly between February and May, but also at other times during the year. It must be harvested before flowering, or it is too bitter. It’s one of the most well-known plants used in cooking. Various parts of the plant are used to make simple but tasty recipes. Boiled egg can make the flavour smoother. It’s great in salads, especially with primrose leaves; boiled or sautéed it can also be used in soups and broths. The flower buds can be pickled in vinegar (or in oil after previously salting and parboiling the buds in vinegar and white wine with garlic and bay leaves), and used in place of capers. In the towns of the surrounding Triestino or Goriziano areas, the harvest of *thale* was not just for local consumption but it was also sold. Blowing dandelion flowers are a part of childhood memories: if the flowers could be blown away with a single puff, if was possible to make a dream come true.





## Girini, crumbs of thrown pasta Wild asparagus, hops, sculpit and violets

for 4 people

### For the 'girini'

8 eggs  
300 g flour

Whisk the eggs in a bowl, then leave to rest for about ten minutes. Add in the sifted flour with the help of a whisk, stirring vigorously. Leave to rest for 15 minutes and then pour the mixture through a strainer. Immerse the 'girini' that form in boiling water. As soon as they come to the surface, drain under cold water.

### For the condiment

100 g rabbit loins  
2 bunches wild asparagus  
2 bunches hops shoots (urtisons)  
40 g wild silene (sculpit)  
8 grape tomatoes  
2 sprigs fresh oregano  
50-70 g butter  
salt and pepper

Melt the butter in a pan, add the rabbit loin cut into slices with the oregano leaves, wild asparagus tips and hop shoots. Leave to brown for a minute and then add the grape tomatoes cut into quarters. Add the pasta directly to the pan, adjusting to taste with salt and pepper and finally, add the silene. Mix well.

### To complete the dish

Montasio Stravecchio cheese  
a few wild flower petals (violets, rosemary, wild garlic)

Lay the girini in the centre of the plate and add a few shavings of the cheese. Scatter the flowers to garnish.



## Zlikrofi, small tortelli from the Valle d'Idrija

for 4 people

### For the dough

500 g flour  
4 eggs

### For the filling

400 g boiled potatoes  
30 g butter  
30 g cooking fat or pork lard  
1/2 onion  
50 g bacon  
2 egg yolks  
salt and pepper  
fresh marjoram  
30 g spring onion  
30 g Montasio stravecchio cheese  
4 ladles roasting juices

With the flour and eggs, prepare the pasta as if for lasagne.

Heat the butter and the cooking fat and brown the onion just a little with the bacon. Add the potatoes, already parboiled, peeled and roughly mashed. At the end of cooking, add the egg yolks, salt, pepper, marjoram, spring onions and grated Montasio cheese.

Place the filling, shaped into small balls as big as a wild cherry, onto the pasta that has been rolled into a thin sheet (as for lasagne), measuring the ideal distance between each raviolo with a pinkie finger. When a row is finished, cover with another sheet of pasta, press down to bind around the ball of filling. Cut into individual pieces with the serrated pasta roller. After 'pulling on the ears', give a more square shape to the filled part with a double press of the fingers, trying to leave two small depressions on the pasta. At this point the tortelli are ready to be cooked in boiling salted water for a few minutes.

### To complete the dish

Serve the zlikrofi with a drizzle of roasting juices and a few shavings of Montasio vecchio cheese.

## Mlinci

for 4 people

### For the white meat ragout

200 g each rabbit, veal, pork  
50 g aged lard  
1 medium onion  
1 carrot  
1 clove garlic  
1 sprig marjoram  
1 sprig thyme  
4 grape tomatoes  
60 g fresh peas  
1 glass white wine  
broth to taste  
salt and pepper

### For the mlinci

150 g flour  
50 g cornmeal for polenta  
2 eggs

Chop the onion and lard and brown in a saucepan. Chop the meat finely and cut the carrots into cubes. Add the clove of garlic and the finely chopped meat to the gravy and continue cooking, then add the white wine and leave it to evaporate. Add the carrots and tomatoes and cover with broth. Once cooked, add the marjoram and chopped thyme. Adjust with salt and pepper. Boil the fresh peas separately.

Combine all the ingredients and knead well to obtain a smooth dough. Allow it to rest, then roll out into sheets. Sear the sheets on a griddle and break into irregular pieces.

Cook the mlinci in boiling salted water, drain, and sauté in the prepared sauce adding in the peas.

### To complete the dish

Prepare a dish with pieces of shredded mlinci and sauce, topping with grated parmesan.





## Venison fillet, served bittersweet

for 4 people

### For the venison fillet

*Venison, filleted with all small sinews removed  
thyme  
marjoram  
garlic  
a knob of butter  
pepper*

After filleting and carefully cleaning the meat, marinate for at least one day. For a good marinade, vacuum seal the fillet with aromatic herbs, garlic and pepper. Sear the fillet on a very hot grill and heat the sauce (see preparation below). The meat must be tender and very juicy inside.

### For the sauce

*1 tablespoon cranberry jam  
50 g butter  
1 tablespoon flour  
200 ml red wine  
2 sprigs rosemary  
salt, pepper  
broth to taste*

Heat the butter, toast the rosemary and flour, add the red wine and let evaporate. Add a ladle of broth to reach the required density and adjust with salt and pepper. Add the cranberry jam to obtain a creamy and bittersweet sauce.

### To complete the dish

*Roasted polenta*

*Cut the meat in large slices and place on a serving dish. Add the roasted polenta and garnish with the berry sauce.*

## Guinea fowl with silene

for 4 people

*4 marinated guinea fowl breasts  
a knob of butter  
4 bunches of silene  
olive oil  
splash of grape vinegar  
salt and pepper*

Melt the knob of butter in a pot and brown the breasts on high heat. Adjust with salt and pepper and leave to cook. Clean the silene and dress with salt, pepper, oil and a splash of vinegar.

### To complete the dish

*1 fennel root  
wild fennel  
olive oil*

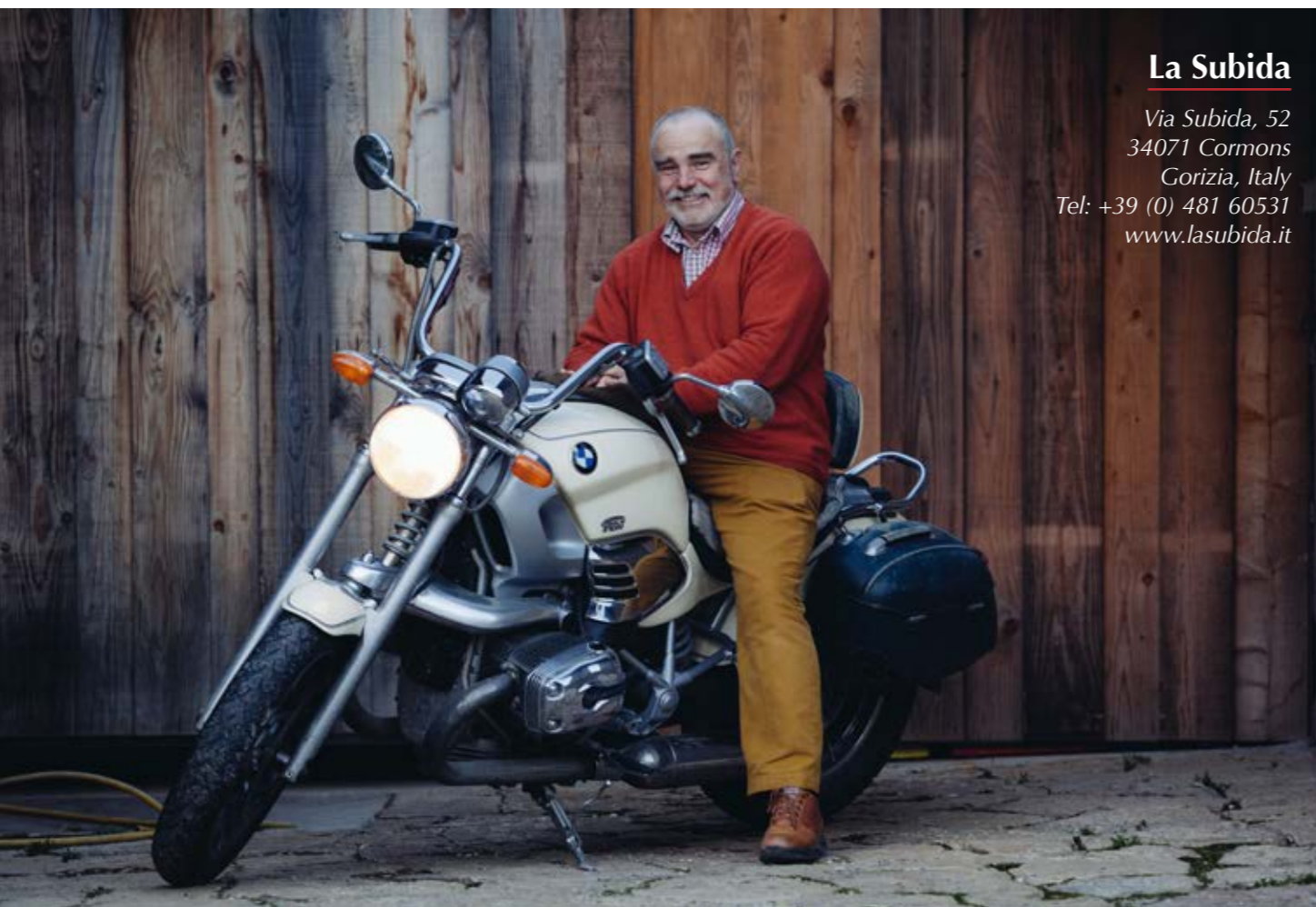
*Place a bunch of dressed silene at the centre of a flat dish. Sprinkle some grated fennel root over it. Cut the guinea fowl breast and lay it delicately over the greens. Scatter the wild fennel leaves cut finely and garnish with a little olive oil.*



## A special dedication: Ana Roš and her vision of Joško

How does one of the best and most talented Slovenian chefs, Ana Roš of the Hiša Franko restaurant in Caporetto, see Joško? "It's great to talk about Joško Sirk. If I had to describe him in just two words, I would use the terms 'wise man' or 'the visionary'. Or 'the father' of Slovenian cooking. I can imagine what he would make of these words: he would laugh quietly, and perhaps reply with sarcasm. I met Joško when I was on my first romantic date with Valter, my husband. To excuse himself for his continual lateness – hours of waiting – on our first dates, he took me to Joško's Osteria for a snack and a glass of wine. I was 21, and I had that student enthusiasm that fades as the years pass. Joško saw us and came to sit with us. After a few minutes chatting, I felt a strong desire to argue with him. In my irrational

youth I was sure this man had not the faintest idea of what the real Slovenia meant. But we liked each other all the same. I think La Subida is the home of many Slovenian gourmets. Many of us took our first steps in the world of cooking and wine through Joško's kitchen and have been affected by it. Veal liver with soft polenta and rhubarb or rabbit cooked in butter with fried tarragon and red currants, to name a couple of recipes. His philosophy of local and regional wine. His decision to put only local and regional things on the plate. An Italian Michelin star who cooks veal shank, *mlinci* and *Idrija žlikrofi*. Someone who scents dishes with elder, a flower that we Slovenians have always used. It was at La Subida where I understood about being proud of the flavour and soul of Slovenia. Joško with his Slovenian dialect is more Slovenian than many of us. In his dress, his thoughts, and in his cooking."



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Joško Sirk



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