

Romanengo's handmade sweets have been enjoyed by Italians since 1780.

Anastasia Edwards reports

Every summer, Pietro Romanengo mounts the vintage red scooter parked outside his family's sweet factory on the edge of Genoa's medieval quarter and heads for the mountains. But after only a week or two, the responsibilities of running Pietro Romanengo fu Stefano, which many Italians consider the country's finest sweetmaker, lure him back. He is the seventh generation of his family to run the business, which has operated since 1780.

Little has changed in that time. Most of the sweets are still made by hand, and one would be hard-pressed to find many objects in the factory that date much later than the 1950s. The elegant and vivacious Delfina Romanengo, who is married to Pietro's brother, and who along with him and another brother, Giovanni Battista, runs the business, insists that this isn't deliberate. "If we were to come across a modern machine that didn't compromise quality, we would use it."

All the sweets are made on the premises, a quirky warren of a building set into the hills that surround gritty central Genoa, its interior an oasis of white-washed walls and white-tiled floors.

Delfina gives me a tour. The first floor is dedicated to the candying of fruit and nuts. A woman sits wrapping chestnuts, two at a time, in pieces of tulle. "Chestnuts are by far the most delicate of things we candy," explains Delfina. "They need to be treated with great care, otherwise they crumble to pieces during the candying process."

She adds that *marron glacé* is not a French invention, as is often believed, but a Genoese one. The political, social and culinary histories of the great port city-state of Genoa and southern France have overlapped for centuries, however, and Delfina concedes that French chocolate-making techniques had been one of the two big influences on Italian sweet-making.

The company's logo, a dove and an olive branch, were created in the early 19th century to augur peace in the wake of the Napoleonic wars. The other big influence, Delfina explains, was the Orient. During the Crusades, Genoa's renowned sailors returned from the Middle East bringing Arab sweet-making techniques.

Genoa's hinterland, the boomerang-shaped region of Liguria, is bordered on one side by the Mediterranean and on the other by the Apennine mountains. This seals in a microclimate that allows succulent fruit to flourish, as well as making it one of the world's most important flower-growing regions. The local bounty, mixed with Arab sugaring techniques, made Genoa famous for candying fruit, a legacy as ubiquitous as the citrus peel in your slice of Genoa cake.

That morning, the sturdier fruits are steeping in vats of sugar syrup, undergoing various stages of the candying process. There are kiwis, oranges, strawberries and lemons, and a special order of candied grapefruit, commissioned by a wealthy Genoese man who was proud of the magnificent grapefruits grown in his garden.

The candying process is simple but time-consuming. Steel vats the size of bathtubs have a concealed double-bottom, and lukewarm water circulates below the fruit and syrups. Peering into a vat, Delfina explains that "a sort of osmotic process takes place, whereby the sugar gets in and the fruit's moisture is drawn out, until there is perfect balance".

The results are striking. These candied fruits offer an ideal of what any fruit should be. They preserve and intensify the recollection of eating the real thing, especially with citrus fruits, as one eats the candied pith and skin, in all their bittersweetness. With more delicate fruits, such as peaches, a bloomy delicateness is carried over from the fresh into the candied fruit. Eating them



Eye-candy Clockwise from main picture, the historic shop in Genoa; a worker with a tray of sweets; the rose petals used to make rose syrup; a sepiá sweet box with a wedding scene

Andrea Frazzetta/Grazia Neri

recalls the medieval world, when eating unseasonally, with the exception of preserved foods, was not an option.

The Romanengos are most proud of their candied flowers. By far the most laborious and expensive of their products are sugared violet petals, which are sprinkled in the boxes of *marrons glacés*. "They are not sugar with a violet flavour but actual violet petals," Delfina stresses. "Each petal has to be laid down with toothpicks." The violets are brought at night from the town of Taggia, close to San Remo, to avoid the wilting effects of even a mildly sunny day. Again, the taste sensation is exquisite, bringing an anomalous but pleasant sensory role reversal: tasting, rather than smelling, a fragrance.

The highlight of the factory calendar is making rose syrup, which takes place in late April or May, the exact date dependent on whenever the weather brings the roses into bloom. For longer than Giovanni Battista Romanengo can remember, people in and around Genoa have brought their rose petals to the factory - from private gardens and convents and parks - so that their essence can be captured in a small, costly bottle that will dispense fragrant flavourings for ice water on a hot day and, increasingly, used on ice-cream and with Prosecco.

Andrea Rocco, a Genoese man who spent 12 years in Los Angeles promoting Italian food for the Italian Institute for Foreign

Trade, acts as an international market consultant to the Romanengos. Rocco explains that breaking into the Japanese market took four years. One of Romanengo candy-makers went over to do demonstrations in Tokyo, an initiative that was rewarded with a concession at the Iset department store chain. Oddly, the U despite Rocco's contacts, has not been receptive market. "It is easier in Japan at Europe, where we share a common sweet eating heritage," says Giovanni Battista.

In the company's flagship shop on V Soziglia, one of its three shops in Genoa, the marbled and wood-paneled interiors have remained unchanged since 1814. A tat groans with sample *bomboniere*. These bundles of almond *dragées* are traditionally given in Italy to guests at weddings and to family and friends after the birth of a child. Wh they can sometimes be garish and extravagant, at Romanengo they are stylish and even understated.

Bridal couples can opt for Chartreux coloured chiffon packages tied with a bright orange bow - a style reminiscent of Pa Smith - or the understatement of a pale-blue cotton pouch with navy piping and the initials monogrammed in a plain font - ve Jermyn Street. For inspiration, the cabin lining the back room show a collection of *bomboniere* from the past 150 years, which follow the social history of the Italian wa

La dolce vita



ding - one, a sepia oval box, depicts a young man with ringlets courting a maiden in a crinoline and bonnet.

These bomboniere recall the days when the royal families of Europe commissioned Romanengo to produce their sweets for both private and official functions (as many celebrities and royal households still do). Giovanni Battista is especially proud of this legacy and relates with glee that Giuseppe Verdi was an ardent customer. Some of his letters, she says, preserved at La Scala opera house in Milan, rhapsodise over Romanengo's candied fruit.

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Details

Romanengo products are available in the UK at **Carluccio's** and **Petersham Nurseries** in London, and at **Meluki** in Beaconsfield and also at: **Formaggio Kitchen**, New York, Boston and Cambridge; **Italian Harvest**, San Francisco; **Mitsukoshi**, various locations in Japan; **Melji Supermarkets**, various locations in Japan; **Fujio Supermarkets**, various locations in Japan.