

Fly Fishing Italy

by Korrie Broos

10 000km of rivers, great scenery, beautiful architecture, good food, probably the best coffee in the world and fantastic wine. This is fly fishing Italy.

It started in 2002 when I met Edoardo Ferrero, a member of the Italian team in France at the world fly fishing championships. Last year I invited him to come to South Africa to show us the techniques that have made Italy and France the most successful teams in this competition. He was so enamoured of our country that, within four days, he booked a trip for himself and his family, a friend Pier Luigi Concito and Pier's fiancée. After three weeks of South African hospitality he decided to reciprocate by exposing me to what he termed "Fly fishing's best kept secret."

Fly fishing started in Italy about 500 years ago in the Valcesia River and the lines they used were made from the plaited tail hair of a stallion (the tail hair of a mare is more brittle because it is more exposed to urine and the alkali it contains). Apparently you could easily distinguish the stallions from a distance - their tails were sparse indeed! The flies used were traditional soft hackle patterns – just a thread body and a turn of hackle at the eye.

My Italian fishing safari started in Abruzzo which is at the same latitude as Rome but on the East coast, half way down the length of Italy. The mountains here are the Apennines that run about half the country's length.

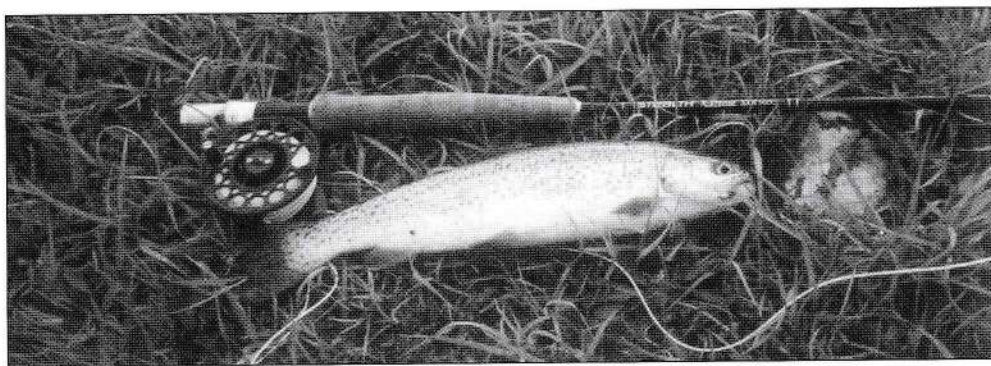
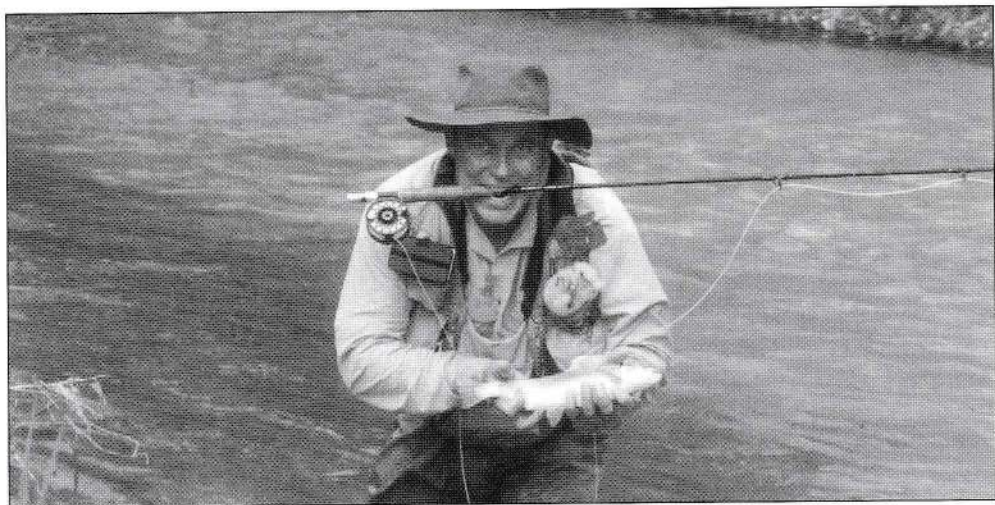
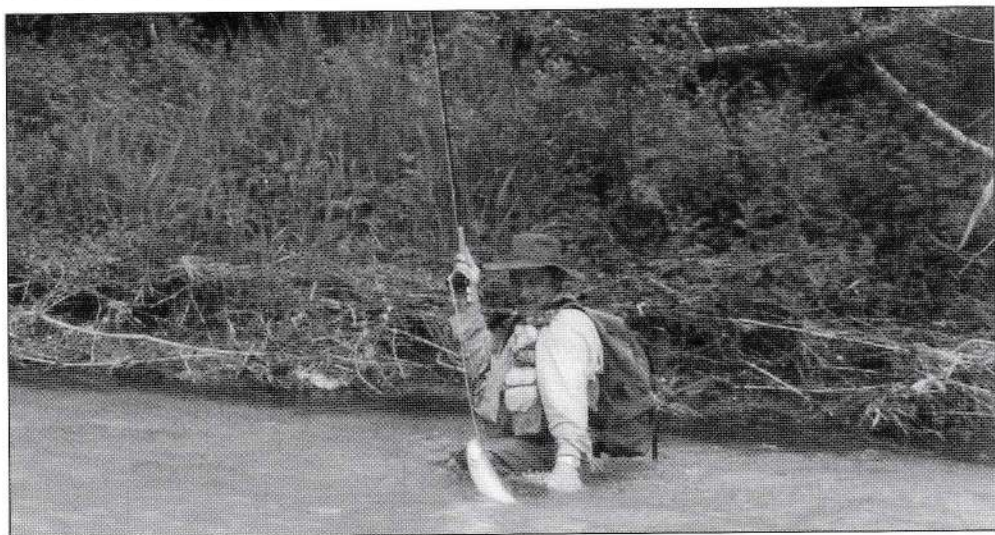
I landed in Milan and we faced an 800km journey to Abruzzo.

As we started the drive Edoardo dispensed the first of the many little lessons about Italian culture I was to receive in the next few weeks: If there is a car behind you and you have a broken white line ahead of you, you will be overtaken. And if you have a solid white line, you will still be overtaken. Second lesson, the speed limit on the main roads is 80 to 100km/h depending where you are and on the autostrada it is 130km/h. The traffic rules are only there so that they/you know when they /you start breaking the law.

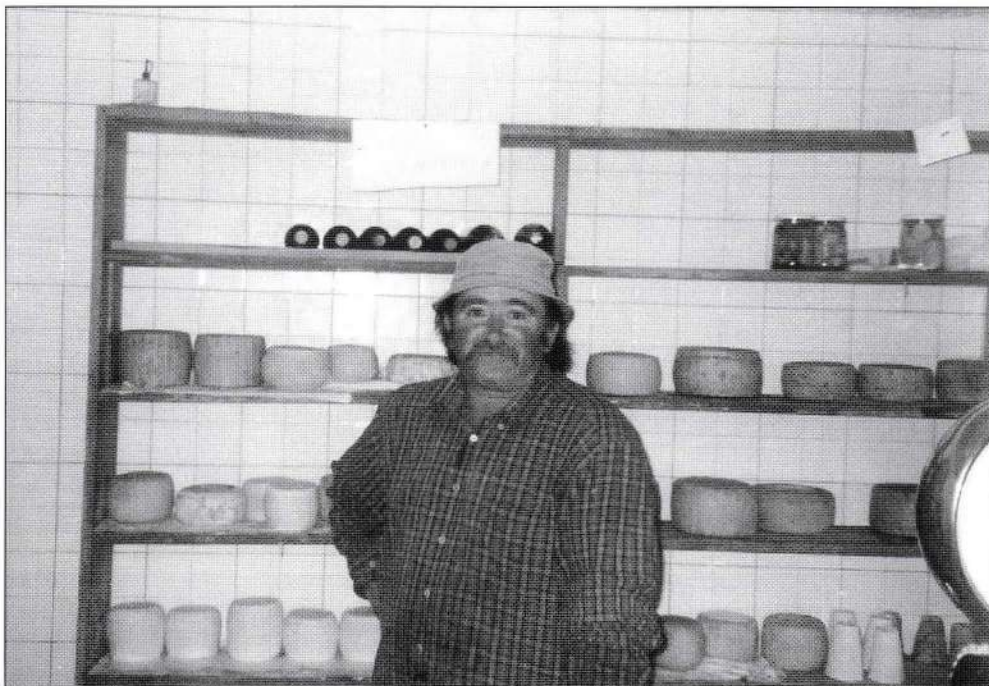
So we are off to Abruzzo. Now, when it comes to roadside coffee in South Africa, Edoardo knows that at our One Stop, Ultra Cities you drive in, stop, sit down and wait five minutes to be served. Then the waiter takes your order. Ten minutes later your coffee arrives, you drink it, wait for the bill, pay and another five minutes later you are on the road again. Elapsed time? Between 20 and 25 minutes. So he asks me if I would like some coffee - Italian not South African style.

Always one for another new experience, I said yes. On their autostradas they have an Autogrill coupled with a filling station. The time from when we took the off-ramp from the freeway and returned to it was 4.5minutes.

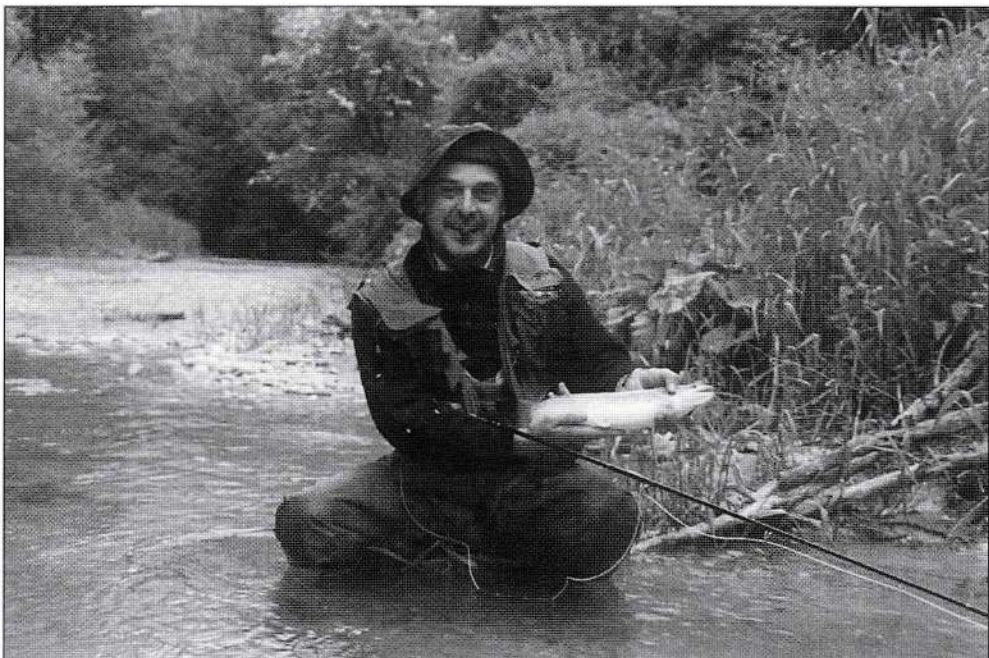
The procedure was as follows; and this is how about 95% of all coffee is consumed in coffee shops, restaurants and bars. You approach the serving counter (no waiters), ask for



With a little tuition from his Italian hosts, Korrie landed this rainbow on the Sangro river.



Renato, Castel de Sangro's famous peccorino cheese maker.



Pier-Luigi Concito on the canal section of the Sangro river shows the form that made him individual champion in the 1992 and 1996 world fly fishing championships.

"un espresso e un aqua or aqua frizzante". About 30 seconds later, max, it is placed in front of you and you pay +/- 80c(euro). The coffee is swallowed in a sip or two as the cups are small. The water is swallowed standing, and you are away.

After driving around the Turin/Milan area, picking up other fly fishers, we're off to Castel di Sangro, a town in the province of Abruzzo

So now we are doing 160-170km/hour, two cars in convoy. Even driving at that speed the cars come zipping past, anything from a small Fiat with pistons knocking at the bonnet begging for mercy not to be revved so high, to big Volkswagen Touaregs and Porsche Cayennes.

As the weekend was a scheduled round of the Italian National Fly Fishing Championships, the two cars were packed with anglers aspiring to a place in the national side. It was postponed however, because the rivers were swollen and turbid with run-off caused by melting snow. Europe had had such heavy and late snowfalls that all the peaks en route to Abruzzo were covered.

Italians, being descendants of the Romans who gave us a Coliseum that is still in working order 2000 years later, have this burning desire to build tunnels and bridges. You will probably not see another country with more bridges and tunnels than Italy. In South Africa if there is a hill, koppie or mountain, we either blast it away, cut through it or go around it. Not the Italians. Even if there is only a metre of soil or rock above the regulation height over a road, they see an opportunity to build a tunnel. So here we are, cruising along the Adriatic coast at 160-170km/h. The occupants of the two cars are having a telephone conversation about Fiat's share prices as Mr Agnelli has just died and should they sell their shares or keep them?

Castel di Sangro, which is situated in the Apennine Mountains, about the same latitude as Rome, is considered the headquarters of fly fishing in Italy. It is also the entrance to the Abruzzo National Park, the last place where the Apennine wolf and the Marsican brown bear still occur in the wild in Europe. Here are beautiful villages on mountaintops and others are perched like a woodpecker on a tree trunk, against almost solid rock faces. The determination of those ancient builders to build a safe house almost matches the desire of anglers to catch that elusive trout.

As you approach Castel di Sangro from the Adriatic coast you have to go over the Apennine Mountains. At the top of these mountains there is a plateau of seven kilometres. After climbing almost 15km of mountain passes you find it quite surreal to suddenly find yourself on this flat piece of land.

Castel di Sangro is a town with +/- 5 000 inhabitants and also hosted the 1992 world fly fishing championships

Its main river is the Sangro and, like most rivers in Europe, it is perennial and has a dam, used to generate hydro-electricity, that provides an outstanding tailwater fishery.

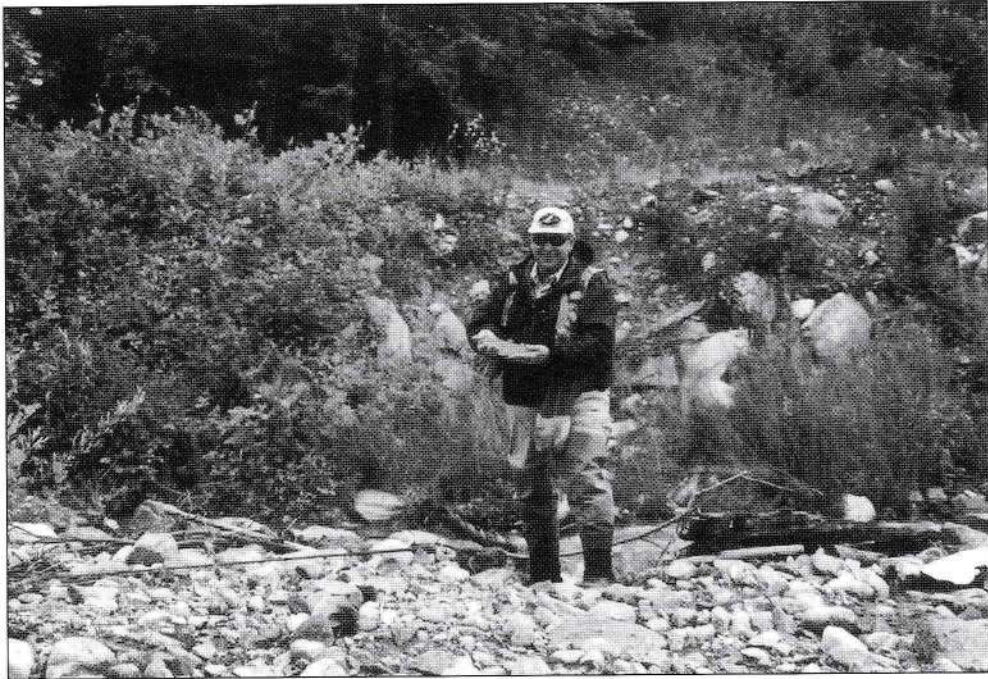
Most hydro-electric schemes in Italy provide electricity to stabilise the supply for the

local grid from Monday to Friday from 7am to 3 pm. When we arrived late on Friday the sluices were already closed and the water levels had dropped but we were too late to test the water. The Sangro River brown and rainbow trout had to wait until the next morning. So we got ready for dinner. As most people are aware, food for Italians is infinitely more than a means to still the pangs of hunger. It is a passion - and in some areas it is more, a religion. About 3km outside Castel di Sangro is a tiny village with a restaurant so tucked away that you would be unlikely to find it without assistance. It belonged to a fly fisher who passed away years ago but his 84-year-old wife still manages the establishment with her daughter and her son-in-law. The restaurant's name translated into English, is "the tall man" a reference to the height of its founder - more than two metres, exceptionally tall for an Italian. For fly fishers a meal at this restaurant is an essential part of visiting Castel di Sangro. Here, every mushroom is still hand-picked in the woods, the vegetables are grown in their own garden, the meat is from their own sheep and cows and the pasta is homemade. While you are enjoying the meal the matriarchal owner will stop by to ask whether the trout are moving, what flies they are taking and whether any sizable fish have been caught.

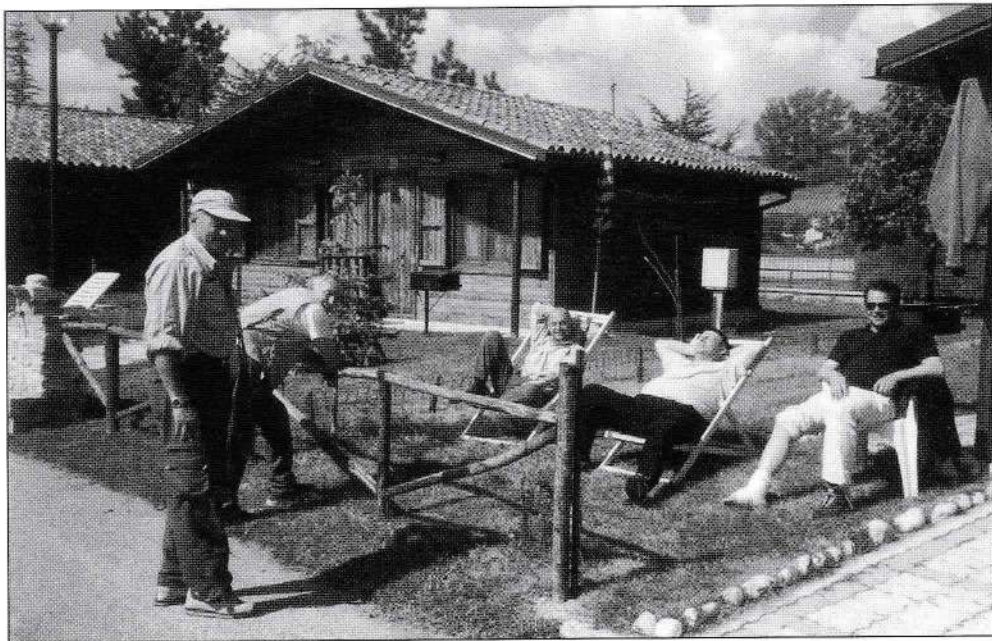
My first morning, in true South African fashion, I was up at seven, ready and eager to fish. In Italy, however, as I was to discover, life is a little different. They sleep till eight, take their time getting dressed and then find a restaurant to enjoy a leisurely breakfast of espresso and a croissant or a chocolate brioche. Drive back and get the fishing gear. Then we drive to a nearby village of about 20 houses. Once there, one of my hosts, Carlos Baldassini, who lives in Castel di Sangro, strolls into a house and the rest of us trundle along. The local bakery has no name sign, no name, but everyone in the village obviously knows this is where the bakery has been for the last who knows how many centuries - as the buildings testify - and buys a couple of flat pizza breads about 60cm in diameter: lunch.

I'm told, when in Rome do as the Romans... out we go, down an alley, into another door - again no sign or name, the butcher and grocery store - again having been in the same building forever. Our recently purchased bread loaves are handed over, split and layered with thick slices of homemade peccorino cheese and ham and off we go, all the while sharing greetings with all and sundry, answering enquiries about mamma and papa and introducing the South African. Total time: 50 minutes. Life in Italy is not rushed. Finally we are off to the river. My guide and fishing companion for the day, Carlos, does not speak English but, no problem, the language of fly fishing is universal.

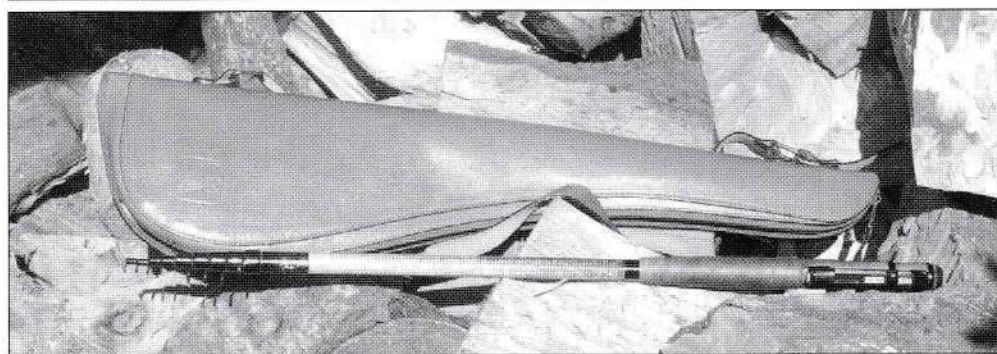
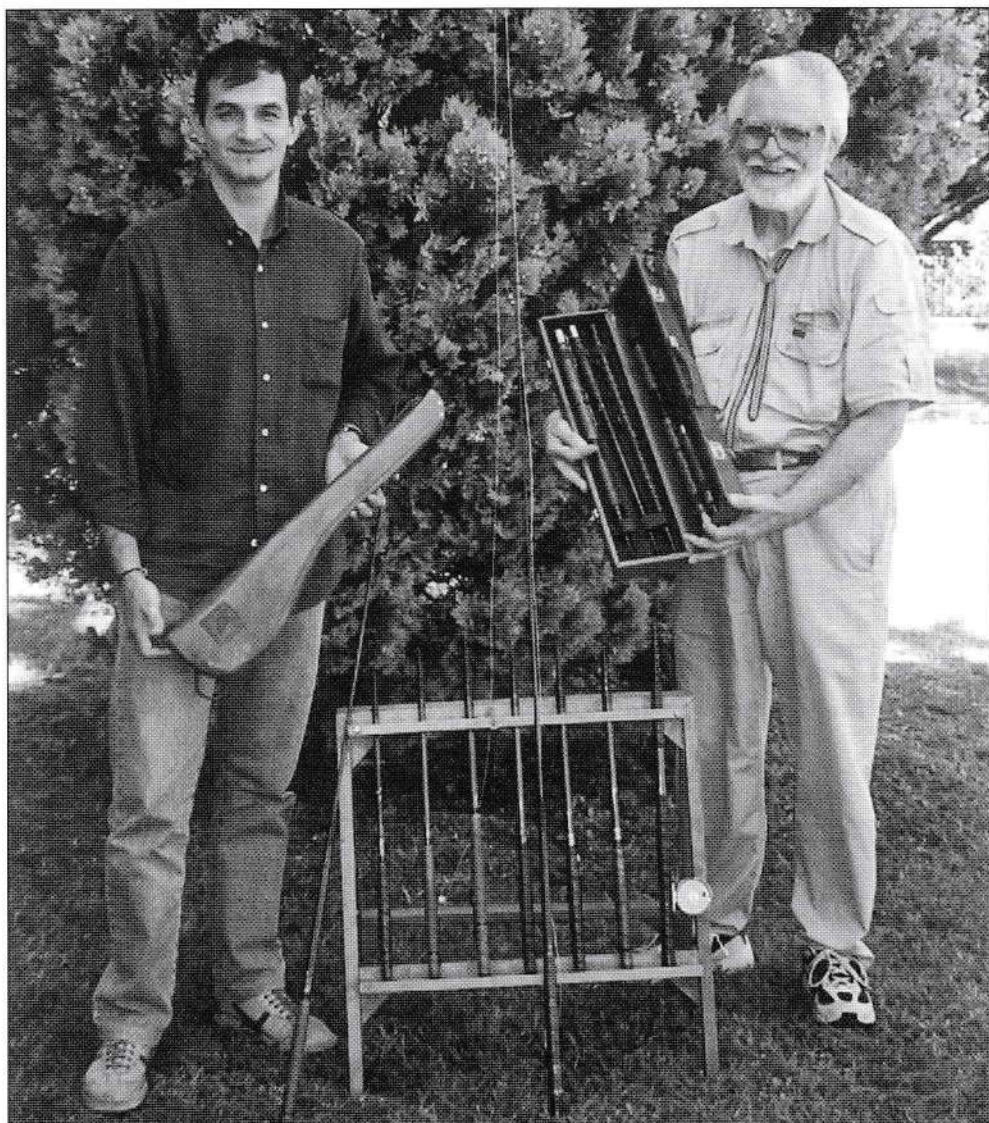
I carefully observe how he rigs up his rod, leader and tippet and what flies he chooses - as I said "when in Rome..." As a local man and someone who has fished in twelve world championships he has a wealth of expertise from which I can benefit. Ten-foot, tapered leader and two gold ribbed hare's ear nymphs. One with a brass bead and one with a plastic-coated, brass bead. No, that is too simple, I think. I get handed the same flies, but put them on my own leader setup. As it is Saturday the hydro-electric sluice gates are closed and the river is low, but the water is slightly discoloured from the snowmelt. Quickly I get shown the water and invited, as the guest, to fish first. After 10 minutes and no fish I get told in the universal sign language of flyfishing, no your methods will not work here. After five minutes and four fish, I was almost convinced he could walk on water as well. Never before have I witnessed some one who lands his nymphs with such



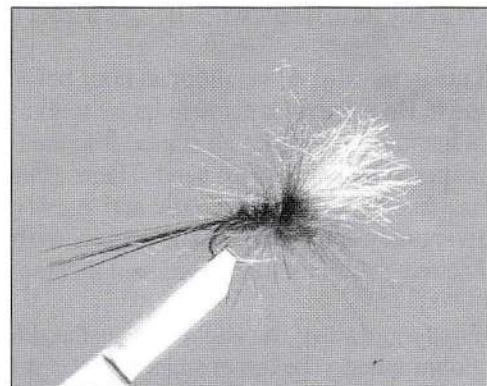
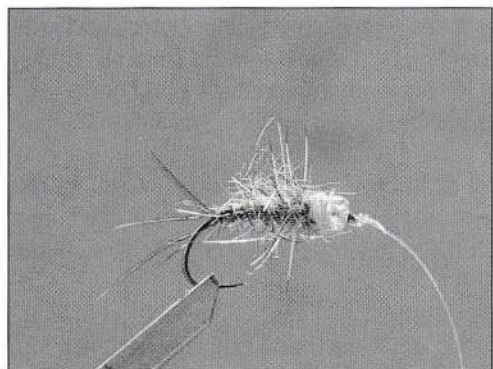
Edoardo, "The Maestro" Ferrero revealing one of fly fishing's best kept secrets.



When in Italy ...early morning starts are for the birds catching worms rather than fly fishers catching trout.



*Top: Francesco Palu and his son with their ingenious extendable carbon fibre fly rods.
Bottom: Korrie's rod and its leather case.*



Six examples of Italian flies. Clockwise from top left, the first five are by Francesco Palu. The sixth, middle left, is Edoardo Ferrero's favourite fly, a bead head GRHE with a fluorescent orange hotspot behind the bead and tails made from pheasant tail fibres. Palu's flies are: dry stonefly, emerging stonefly, mayfly dun, CDC midge and a Poliefitus nymph with the bead placed on a pin on top of the shank so that it swims upside down.

a tiny plop and then uses his fly rod like a magic wand and paints these little fictitious strokes in the air. I could just watch in awe and visualise the flies at the end of the tippet, like little nymphs darting around the riverbed seeking safety. No self-respecting trout would be able to resist them. For the next 20 minutes I was spellbound by this magic wand, seducing one trout after the other. After each successful strike he would indicate that I should continue fishing. I, however could only shake my head, indicating that he should carry on as I stood there observing his fluid yet gentle technique and wanting to shout "Encore, Encore!!" after every fish. This was poetry in motion. Eventually I started to fish, with the Italian giving instructions in Italian on how I should do this and do that. Success came within five minutes and I hooked my first Italian brown trout. Between the pizza bread and the trout, the next three hours rushed past.

The Sangro river has four distinct sections: the upper reaches that are about 30km long. The trout here are extremely difficult to catch as the water is very clear before and after the snow has melted. The terrain does not provide easy fishing and the trout are highly selective. Even my hosts who have currently 38 world championships - and counting - between them have labeled them, "The untouchables."

The next section we fished starts above Castel di Sangro and then runs through it. The upper section where the river goes through the town has been canalised and every 50m it steps down by about 1m. Here one can watch the water level dropping by 30 to 40cm when the hydro-electric station opens.

I fished this canal section of the river the following day with Pier-Luigi Concito, victor in the 1992 and 1996 world championship. Never before have I encountered somebody who experienced such boyish pleasure catching 10-15cm trout in water 10-15cm deep. The sheer joy he displays when he sees a trout taking his nymph is an equivalent joy to watch.

Late in the afternoon, about an hour before sunset, we fished 15 km downstream of the town. Here the river is much larger with a number of tributaries contributing to the flow. When the evening hatch started it looked as though a myriad of tiny pebbles had been scattered by some giant hand. There were so many rises that you did not know which one to cast to and every now and again you could hear a larger trout sucking in a fly. Eventually you cast almost at random to where you think the biggest fish could be holding. I found it difficult to comprehend that the river could hold so many fish.

What aggravated the situation was the difficulty of attaching a new fly in the gathering gloom when your tippet snapped after yet another over-excited strike. A couple of fish later we called it a day and went to tidy up in preparation for a typical, three-hour, Italian repast.

On the Monday morning we went for breakfast with the local peccorino cheese maker.

For the Italians it is very important to preserve their old culture and ways. Making peccorino cheese by hand is still one of the sacred Italian traditions, where the local sheep farmer will graze his sheep in the mountains and bring them home in the evening to milk so that his family can make the resulting exquisite cheese. Breakfast here is cheese, salami some fresh bread and a glass (big) of red wine.

The rest of the morning we spent tying flies and playing cards as the hydro-electric station was generating electricity and, with the river 40cm higher, it is almost impossible to wade. At two pm you get ready and then it's off to the river where you wait for the water level to drop, the length of your sojourn depending on the extent to which the demand for electricity tapers off. The river is fishable from 14.30 and 15.00. When the river reaches its lowest flow level it takes another twenty minutes before the fish are sufficiently comfortable again to start feeding and then ... heaven! Having had to shelter from the current for the previous eight hours the fish are now very hungry and go on a feeding binge. Trout will take almost any nymph that is delicately presented and to catch twenty in the ensuing hour is not uncommon. All good things come to an end, however, and when this splurge is over they revert to their normal wily mode and you have to know your story to catch them.

It was with a sad heart that I left Castel di Sangro and for the next three days it was the normal tourist things. Rome, the Vatican and then off to Tuscany and a very brief twenty-four hour visit to Florence.

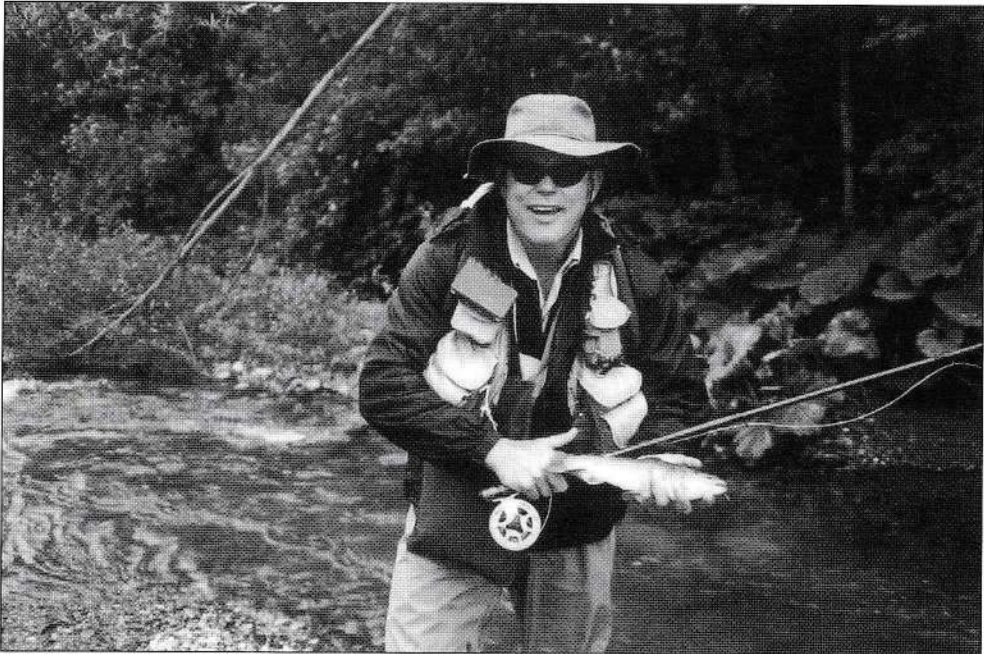
Take a twenty minute drive north of Florence and you find yourself in the foothills of the Apennine Alps. Another 40 minutes of driving up the curving mountain roads and you are on the watershed of the water draining north and south. My fishing partner, guide, and gillie was another member of the Italian team, Alesandro Sgrani and the venue was the Lima River. After having learned the requisite techniques in the past few days on the Sangro, I was ready to catch every trout in this new river.

Halfway down the valley we stopped at the river which, in our terms, is a large river but, by European standards is medium. After fishing for half an hour and exhausting all my newly acquired methods I was fishless and Alesandro was 10 fish up, this despite the fact that I was using identical flies. I decided to acknowledge the obvious and approached him to ascertain what I was doing wrong. His response? "This is not the Sangro river" He explained that here your nymph has to drift 100% naturally. If you get that right the trout only gives the nymph a single, gentle tap, so surreptitious that it feels as if the nymph has barely nudged a riverbed rock. If you fail to register this as a hit and your reflexes are not sufficiently sharp to react instantly, you won't catch a single fish. As a result, he said, many an experienced fly angler on his or her first visit had come to the conclusion that the river was devoid of fish. After changing my leader setup to replicate his and seeking to emulate his drag-free drift, I caught a couple of fish.

Back in San Marcello, the little village where we stayed for the night, I started noticing an odd fact about the cars there. In the older section of the village the cars are, of necessity, narrower because the streets are narrower. Buy a car that is too big and you would have to park in the village square and walk home.

If you ever visit San Marcello, spend some time in the village square. On one side is the cobbler who, at very reasonable prices, makes the finest Italian shoes by hand. But, be warned, Italians usually have dainty feet and, if you normally require a size 10 or larger, you might find shoes that fit difficult to acquire.

Departing San Marcello we drove to the Piemonte region. If you want to experience the



Korrie Broos mastering the canal section of the Sangro river.

finest of Italy's cuisine be aware that this area is considered to be the gastronomic capital of Italy. Truffle country, the best red wines, the birthplace of the slow food movement and home to the Ferrero Rocher and Nutella chocolate factories. Fully aware that I had gained four kg in little more than a fortnight, this section of my visit required enormous self-restraint. In some places the antipasta section of the menu comprises between 10 and 20 courses. This before you get to the main and secondary dishes ... or, as they say in Italy, Pasta primi piatti and secondo piatti.

Not that the title is easily conceded by other regions. Naples and Rome have a competition to see who makes the best pizza and there are other areas that have their local specialities, but Piemonte reigns supreme for all round gastronomic delight.

Alba is the truffle headquarters of Italy. Last year a truffle was sold for the equivalent of R22 000.00 a kilogram. (No printing error - twenty two thousand rand).

The western border of the Piemonte area and of Italy is the Alps. Out of the Alps flow numerous rivers and in these rivers you have brown, rainbow, marble, brook trout and grayling.

When you travel in the Piemonte region and your host is Edoardo Ferrero you know for certain that you will experience the finest gastronomic delights and the best of fly fishing. I have never encountered a person more passionate about fly fishing than Edoardo and when it comes to food his words with the heavy Italian accent describes it best. "When a you a live in Piemonte and a you a love the eating...", then you understand why he is a little larger than life.

So, having experienced the best of central Italy, the opportunity to experience the best that the north west had to offer was not to be missed. Living between the Swiss and French borders of Italy, the people here regard themselves as having an identity of their own, almost an aristocracy. This is understandable because Turin is where the King had his royal seat and his country residence was situated outside Alba until the abolition of the kingdom in Italy by Mussolini.

It was also in Alba that I met a fly fishing friend of Edoardo. We started talking and, in the normal flow of the conversation enquired about who does what for a living. He mentioned he had a travel agency. What travel do you specialise in, I asked and to what destinations? "Mainly in one, but sometimes two destinations" he said. I was intrigued. Pressed to elaborate he said: "I only sell one-way tickets" Eventually it dawned on me that he was an undertaker! Another of Edoardo's friends is Bebe, the current European fly casting champion. He tutored me in the finer details of TCT (total casting technique) and the Radiante cast. As these are quite radical and technical methods, I will explain them in more detail in next year's edition of *Piscator*.

Before you head off to the Alpine mountains with all its many rivers, make sure you visit and explore the Piemonte area. Turin is an absolute must with its wide boulevards and its sidewalks graced by glorious architecture, a legacy of the fact that the King found walking in the rain abhorrent. And, if you are a coffee and chocolate addict this is Nirvana. Its chocolates are considered among the finest in the world and its coffee shops must be

among the most elegant. Many are more than a century old as the wood and marble décor attests and you will be served on silver plates that date from the opening of the shop.

Wine lovers need to visit Barolo and Barbaresco. These two towns are where the King and Queen of red wines are made in Italy. Depending on your personal preference, you can decide which one is the Queen and which one is the King. The arguments have never abated and are still far from settled.

The Alps have so many valleys that it is almost impossible to fish them all in a holiday. Acquire a fishing licence and you can fish all rivers in this area. There is no beat system or private water. So if you end up on the river after a weekend you could encounter a fair number of anglers but the higher you go up in the valleys the fewer they get.

But, a word of caution. One day, as we drove up a promising valley, we noticed some low clouds and mist beginning to form. Five minutes later we were in snow, and pretty soon the ground was completely white and this was during the second week in June – supposedly mid-summer in Europe. So, take a fleece jacket or a waterproof wading jacket if you decide to fish at high altitude. The advantage in these valleys however is that the road follows the river and never you are never more than two hundred metres from it. Every couple of hundred meters there is a picnic spot next to the river where you can park only a few minute's walk from the water.

At the top of the Grano valley lies the village of Castel Magno where they make what is considered the most exclusive cheese in the world. Only five hundred "rounds" are made each year but you can buy and savour it by the slice.

But, what makes the valley even more special are its trout. Research by the University of Milan has shown that the trout in this river are, at 97%, the purest strain of trout in Europe (they call it "Trout of the Queen" because she was very keen on fishing and she loved this kind of trout). The average size caught during daylight is up to 20 cm. But, as the sun sets, brown trout of up to 25 inches will make their appearance and start feeding. So, be aware that, as twilight sets in, your tippet size should be increased accordingly or ensure that you strike with great circumspection and as much delicacy as you can muster. In the foothills, the lower sections of these rivers contain marble trout that can reach ten pounds. So, have a few streamers ready. Here, you will also find grayling which require exactly the opposite – a small CDC caddis.

The Piemonte Alps are also home to the Valcesia River and, according to tradition, this is where fly fishing was first practised in Italy. Tradition also demands that when you make your first cast from the Valcesia River bridge – it should be an historically appropriate soft hackle pattern – you must make a wish. If nothing else this charming custom will illustrate just how effective these age-old flies are.

In the far Northwest corner of Italy is Val D'Aosta. This tiny province has 11 valleys that you can fish with so many waters you are spoilt for choice. The bag limit is seven fish a day per angler but, while this may seem excessive to those accustomed to the western Cape's catch and release policy, there are more than sufficient fish remaining to virtually guarantee an exceptional and enjoyable day's fishing. The standard fly to start with and

stay with here is also a gold ribbed hare's ear with a gold bead. Unless you end up in a hatch, the GRHE will catch fish for you in 98% of these waters. The majority of anglers fish it upstream with a dead-drift on a 12-foot leader. The takes are very subtle, however, and success is predicated on constant vigilance. As you move higher, the gradient of the river increases and so does the current speed and a nymph suspended beneath a dry fly used as an indicator is a proven tactic.

After completing the north-western sector of our trip, we zipped across to the north-eastern part of Italy, Venice and the Dolomites. Many Italians, when visiting Venice, choose to stay in Soto Marina in Chioggia because the accommodation is substantially cheaper. Chioggia is on the southernmost tip of the delta and is also known as Little Venice.

From Venice we traveled to the Dolomites via a town called Ramanzaco which is home to one of fly fishing's most innovative thinkers, Francesco Palu. It is a pity that so little of the fly fishing literature in the romance languages has been translated into English. For the past three decades Palu has manufactured telescopic fly rods that are extraordinarily versatile. The model that I purchased can be used as a seven-foot, three-weight rod or a thirteen-foot, six-weight model. Friends who have tried the rod with the different line weights have been very surprised at its smooth action and the line control it provides.

At first it sounds impossible for one rod to be able to cast all the different lines but, if you are skeptical, borrow my rod, have a few casts and you will become a convert. The rod's telescopic action works from the top eye. You start pulling the top section out until it has been extended for the minimum fishing length which is seven foot. As the tip is very soft and delicate, it functions very well with a three-weight line.

As you lengthen the rod, a heavier line is required to load it adequately. Nevertheless, even when fully extended you can still load it with a three weight, provided you adapt your casting to favour the tip section. If you change your timing and alter your casting stroke, you can cast virtually a full fly line at any rod extension.

Francesco's fly tying is just as innovative. He utilises his own materials and, while some of his patterns may look radical, he has built up a worldwide clientele that swears by his flies. You can visit his website at www.flyfishingpalu.com.

After spending several fascinating hours with him I departed with an invitation to join him for a day when next I visited the Dolomites.

Although I had been warned that the melting snow had made the rivers unfishable, everything I had heard and read about angling in this region prompted me to endeavour to fish nevertheless. Crossing the first bridge I realised that the warnings were justified. The water was the colour of weak tea, and the waves breaking back upstream testified to the speed of the current and to the futility of trying any further.

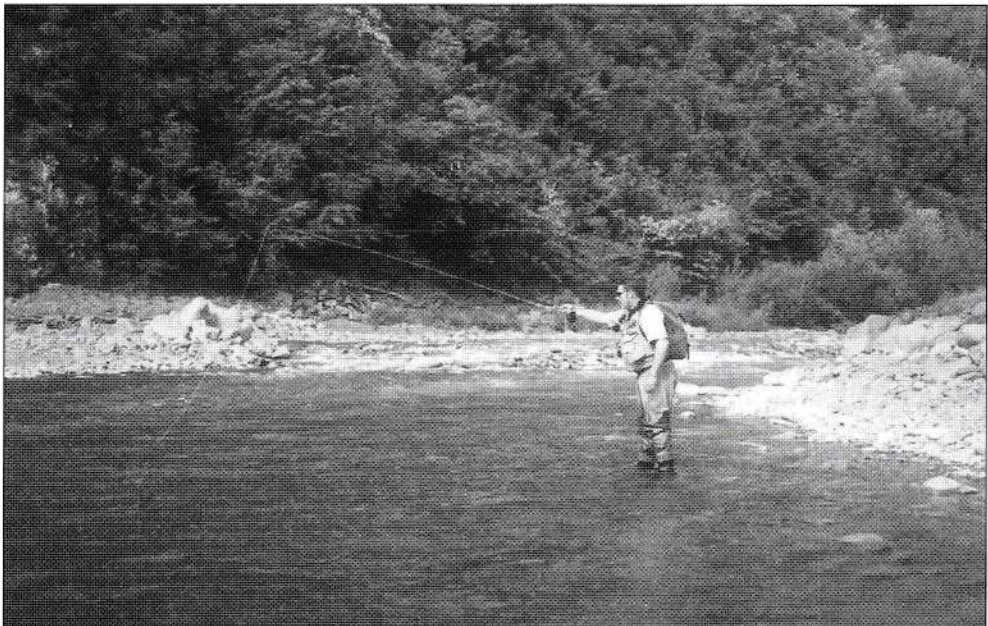
The next two days were spent sightseeing and sampling the local food and wine but at every bridge I stopped and contemplated the torrent and what might have been. One small stream that I observed from a bridge was the exception. Spring-fed, it was, to quote

Tom Sutcliffe, as clear as a newborn baby's tears. Almost immediately, I spotted a brown trout of about 60cm delicately dining on nymphs. Should you want to fish in the Dolomites, you need to get to permission of the land owner – never a problem apparently as they usually welcome strangers.

I was tempted but, with all the fishing gear and luggage packed, I decided it was better to take the three-and-a-half-hour drive to the airport to ensure being on time for my flight. Be warned however, that if you are heading for Milan's Malpensa airport, events can overtake you. In my case they did. It was Friday, the start of the school holidays and Italy was scheduled to play its most important match in the Euro soccer championship. You would be driving into the mother of all traffic jams. The three-and-a-half-hour drive becomes a seven-hour ordeal with every driver trying their best to gain an extra millimetre, determined to get home a nanosecond earlier to catch the kick-off.

Eventually we reached the airport, racing to the check-in counters about five minutes before take off, hoping that we might be lucky and still get on the plane. We feared the worst but luck, very occasionally, is on your side. We were relieved to find that all flights had been delayed to accommodate those delayed in the traffic jam.

Three and a half weeks after my departure from Cape Town, I could testify that Italy is indeed "fly fishing's best kept secret". The visit had given me memories to last a lifetime, but not even a lifetime is sufficient to experience everything Italy has to offer.



Korrie's tries his Czech nymphing techniques on the Sangro river.