

# Tenkara & Pesca alla Valsesiana

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In recent years, tenkara, the traditional method of fly fishing in Japan, has become popular with many people in the US as well as across Europe. But what many people do not realize, is that very similar fishing methods developed independently in other countries. One that is particularly interesting is known as Pesca alla Valsesiana – fishing as in Valsesia, Italy. In this article I will compare the two methods to show their similarities and differences.

## **Tenkara**

Tenkara originated a number of centuries ago in the mountains of Japan, which is full of streams not unlike many of our own streams here in the Sierras [1]. Hunting and fishing became a method of subsistence probably 500-600 years ago. What evolved was a method of fishing that used a long bamboo rod, with a fixed line made of woven horsehair, and simple flies made from natural materials. Various feathers and thread made of colored silk were used. Over time, bamboo rod building became refined considerably with beautifully lacquered multiple sections, which would fit inside of each other for portability. The flies consisted of 2-3 components, using hackle that would open facing forward, straight up, or backwards. Very fine flies were being sold by the 1600's. The flies could be fished on the water surface or below the surface.

Tenkara was first observed and documented by an Englishman Ernest Satow, in the 1880's. Since that time, fly fishing has become more of a sport, with modern materials; we now have telescoping rods of composite materials and lines that are light and visible.

In 2009 Daniel Galhardo started TenkaraUSA, and introduced tenkara to the US and Europe. In 2011 he gave a talk at GBF, which started several of us with tenkara flyfishing.

## **Pesca alla Valsesiana**

Valsesia is located between Turin and Milan in the north of Italy. Its watershed is the southern slopes of the Swiss Alps, and the Sesia River runs through it. A style of flyfishing developed in the valley of Valsesia some centuries ago, with expertise handed down orally through the generations. Until recently, it was

only used by a few people in that area. There is a club of these fishermen (Pesca a mosca Valsesiana) with about a dozen members, some who have fished it for many years. A younger member, Andrea Scalvini, has been responsible for making information more widely known about their fishing method. Historically, as well as today, they use long cane rods in three non-collapsible sections, with braided horsehair lines. The end rod section is bamboo. Rods are 3 to 7 meters in length. The lines taper from around 20 hairs down to very few, and are typically about the length of the rod. They use a brace of 3 or 4 flies of different colors, separated by about 12", with two or three of the flies on short dropper lines. The colors are blue, red, yellow, green, or brown. The flies are remarkably like tenkara flies: thread and reverse hackles. There is a video of Andrea Scalvini talking about and showing the equipment (in Italian), and fishing with it [2].

In 2010, Masami Sakakibara, recognized as the best tenkara fisherman in Japan, went to Italy to meet with the club members, hosted by Arturo Pugno, the club's president. There is a video [3] showing Sakakibara and Pugno fishing their respective methods in the Sesia river, not far from each other.

Marco Baltieri, one of the flyfishmen, has spent considerable effort researching flyfishing in Italy, which developed in the valleys of the Alps, and the information he found suggests very similar methods. He was able to find a number of paintings from the 1530's that showed Grayling, considered a noble fish, hanging from lines, and long rods being used [4]. The most interesting find was a land ownership map from 1775, which clearly showed an illustration of someone fishing with a long rod and line. There was also a fresco from 1538 showing a man holding a cane rod with a fish hanging from the line. He also found text from the 1480's describing 3-section rods. It is presumed that fishing was a matter of subsistence, and later also became a form of recreation.

Today, traditional Pesca alla Valsesiana rods are made by local custom rod makers. Similarly, the Horsehair lines are made by individual fishermen, or by local line makers.

Until recent years, Pesca alla Valsesiana was used by only a few fishermen in the Pesca valley, using techniques handed down to them by ancestors. With the spread of tenkara internationally, some people have been interested in the Valsesia fishing method, and have traveled to that area in Italy to experience it.

## Similarities and Differences

In looking at the two methods, one is struck by the clear historic similarities: the long rods of bamboo or cane with a fixed horsehair line attached to the end; and the reverse-hackled flies. They are fished in a very similar fashion. In the setup of the fishing rig, the Italian method uses a brace of 3-4 flies of different colors, whereas tenkara typically uses a single fly. In the case of tenkara, there are also other types of hackles used besides forward facing: upright and swept back hackles. In both cases, Pesca alla Valsesiana and tenkara, only two or three materials are typically used to tie the flies.

## Current Situation

As mentioned above, tenkara is being used by people in many countries. Now, with the rapid spread of information via the web, Pesca alla Valsesiana has become noticed by others. Some fishermen in Valsesia use tenkara rods for current technology, since there is not a large enough population of local fishermen to encourage the mainline rod manufacturers to supply them with traditional rods. Tenkara rods provide them with light, collapsible rods that are very similar in action to their traditional ones. The cross-fertilization of information between Japan and Italy has been remarkable, as evidenced by the many trips Sakakibara and others have made there.

If you have any questions about these two traditional methods, I would be happy to discuss them with you.

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## References

1. Daniel Galhardo, *Tenkara*, Tenkara Press, [www.tenkarausa.com/publishing](http://www.tenkarausa.com/publishing), 2017.
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OMGEBV77RI4> Scalvini explaining and showing Valsesia fishing. (Italian)
3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bBJaz8Ng1tA> Arturo Pugno and Masami Sakakibara fishing.
4. <http://www.moscavalsesiana.it/photogallery-pesca-mosca-valsesiana.php?album=La%20Storia> Historical paintings from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Click on each one for information (Italian).