

## Consuming, and celebrating, food in Milan

9 Feb 2008 by Nick Lander/ FT



Had Paulo Marchi become a chef like Aduriz, Blumenthal, Cracco and Decoret above, left to right at his recent gluttons' get-together in Milan, as he dreamt of when he was 16, he would have looked every inch the part. A beard covers an obviously jolly face below which is a plump frame that would have bountifully filled out a chef's jacket and apron. No-one would have worried about eating less than magnificently at Casa Marchi.

But when he was interviewed as a possible apprentice by a traditional Milanese chef over 30 years ago he was told that he would have to spend his first year peeling potatoes so instead he decided to take the much riskier option of freelance sports writing like his father. Marchi wrote initially for *Il Giornale* about football, skiing and sailing before turning to food and restaurants.

In the last four years, however, Marchi has probably accomplished far more than any individual chef for the good of his country's cooking by establishing an annual event in Milan known as *Identita Golose*, which can roughly be translated as 'the glutton's profile' although there was not much unanimity about this amongst the numerous Italians I asked.

Marchi was originally inspired by the annual events in San Sebastian and Madrid in Spain where over several days top chefs from around the world have gathered together to demonstrate recipes, exchange ideas and, when the cameras are not rolling, to go out and eat. (Marchi is planning such an event for London later this year.) "Italian chefs have always been extremely knowledgeable about the ingredients they use, particularly since the emergence of Slow Food," Marchi explained, "but I think that they have been falling behind on technique and the very latest developments in the kitchen."

The response from his fellow countrymen has been so overwhelming that *Identita Golose* now takes place over four days rather than the initial two and the determined Marchi now wants it to serve another purpose. "What has always surprised me is how well known so many top Italian chefs are in their own country but yet how few of them are recognised outside Italy," he added. To this end, while I represented British restaurant writers, Heston Blumenthal from The Fat Duck, Bray, Shane Osborn from Pied a Terre, Sanjay Dwivedi from Zaika in London and Sat Bains from Nottingham headed a strong delegation from the UK. We may envy the Italians their sunshine and their produce but, it seems, Italian chefs are also envious of the international profile of so many British chefs.

But before I could experience the charms of any Milanese food, there was a series of fascinating demonstrations. The ultra-successful Lidia and Joe Bastianich gave a talk on managing their group of New York restaurants in New York with Lidia explaining quite how difficult it was to transfer Italian food completely faithfully to the US because, as she put it, "Americans revere protein so much". Father and son Titta and Giancarlo Perbellini, renowned pâtissiers from Isola Rizza in Verona, produced what looked like a ridiculously sweet cake (although the film crew devoured it in seconds). Clare Weatherall from Weatherall Foods in Scotland talked about the pleasures of cooking grouse and two Milanese butchers, Mauro Brun and Bruno Rebuffi, demonstrated just how to bone the highly expensive Piedmontese cow to produce the right cuts for the famous northern Italian dish of 'bollito misto', mixed meats served with its life-enhancing broth.

These events prosper commercially because a considerable area is rented out to suppliers keen to get even closer to the chefs who, for a day or two, are unencumbered by their daily service. For these four days the basement of Palazzo Mezzanotte was a sea of booths offering tastings of mature Parmesan and Prosecco; the latest range of hardware from Alessi; Japanese knives; an array of chefs' uniforms; and that vital ingredient for these long days, samples from a beer company, Birra Moretti. There was also, more surprisingly, a stand from UK Trade and Investment tempting chefs with tea from Taylors of Harrogate, Walkers shortbread and British beef and lamb.

Events like these are also a huge boon for the nearby restaurants, with most putting on a special *Identita Golose* tasting menu. And while over two days I ate excellent traditional fare at Trattoria Milanese with 20 chefs (despite not sitting down until 10.30pm and being the first to leave at 12.30am) and a much more refined meal at Il Luogo di Aimo e Nadia (five minutes drive from the San Siro stadium), I was most impressed by a meal at Trussardi alla Scala, right next to the famous opera house.

This restaurant is the result of the joint efforts of Trussardi, the fashion house, and chef Andrea Berton, who, like many other top Italian chefs, learnt his trade initially under the renowned Gualtiero Marchesi, who, at the age of 78, will open a new restaurant, Il Marchesino (the little marquis), directly opposite in March.

But what this meal taught me was that while Italian chefs may want to learn the techniques of others, when it comes to the design of a restaurant, the execution of a series of disparate and very different dishes and, above all, their speedy execution, they still have a great deal to teach the rest of the world.

Only two colours, red and white, are used in the design of Trussardi alla Scala's room. The floor, walls, serving tables, even the surprisingly comfortable leather armchairs at the tables, are red while the white columns, tablecloths and lampstands provide the contrast, as does Berton's pristine uniform. Tall, distinguished and in his mid-30s, he walked round the room at the beginning of the service with what I think has become today's chef's latest accoutrement, a Mont Blanc pen, in his jacket pocket.

We told our waiter that we had precisely 90 minutes, that two of us wanted the 55 euro set lunch menu while two would order à la carte. The former was served impressively promptly as Berton has created an admirable vehicle on which to deliver this to the many who come here for a business lunch from the numerous offices of the city's financial community. It is a large white plate, almost the size of a chess board, with four indentations that contained, on the day we ate there, a risotto starter, a piece of hake, an exotic version of chicken Kiev with four, plump crisp chips to the side. This was a chic Italian version of a Japanese bento box that could, and should, be easily and widely copied.

The à la carte dishes included an excellent combination of braised cardoons with caramelised pear and black truffles, a classic risotto Milanese, and roast gurnard on a base of a delicate fish soup. Berton has even managed to incorporate seasonality into his petits fours with a range of 'tortelli di Carnevale' which currently incorporate sweet pastries known as *chiacchiere*, or 'gossips', because they used to be eaten in an era when people were wearing masks and so could say exactly what they liked. This chef, waiting team and design combine to make an exceptional restaurant.

**Trattoria Milanese**, via Santa Maria 11, 20123 Milan, +39 02 86.45.19.91,  
**Il Luogo di Aimo e Nadia**, [www.aimoenadia.com](http://www.aimoenadia.com)  
**Trussardi alla Scala**, [www.trussardiallascalala.com](http://www.trussardiallascalala.com)