

One gentleman near Verona

18 Apr 2009 by Nick Lander/ FT but this is longer

Alongside the stands representing many of Italy's 30,000 wine producers at Vinitaly, the annual wine fair held in Verona, are smaller halls filled with food producers and one dedicated to those who produce olive oil. As a result, in early April the narrow streets of this remarkably well-preserved medieval city buzz with the loud chatter of who has eaten or drunk what, where and when.

Surprisingly, these topics of conversation even resurfaced in the queue at Passport Control as we left Verona when I bumped into Rose Gray and a small group of her chefs from the River Café in west London. The sheer size of the hall had left her exhausted. 'We had two meetings with suppliers whose stands were so far from each other that it felt as though we had walked from Sicily to Piedmont', she complained. But compensation had come in a series of mouth-watering cakes that had been prepared for her by the mothers of several winemakers.

Then both Gray, and a leading London wine merchant also in the queue, wanted to know from me whether I had found anywhere more exciting to eat than two of the city's best known trattorie, Il Pompiere and Osteria Giulietta e Romeo, and two that specialise in fish, L'Oste Scuro and Al Cristo, which also boasts a particularly extensive, international wine list.

Having just arrived from a truly memorable meal in an equally memorable setting, I was able to hand them the card that had been on our table at **Antica Locanda Mincio** in Borghetto del Valeggio, a 25-minute drive south west of the city, and only about 20 minutes from the airport. The card also revealed where we had sat, because scribbled in the corner were the words, 'angolo ponte', by the corner with the bridge that spans the river Mincio in this historic village.

I cannot say with complete confidence that these two words were written by Gabriele Bertaiola, the Locanda's proud owner, but, having watched him at work for 90 minutes, I can definitely say that little escapes his attention.

Tall, slightly ascetic-looking and sporting a neat beard that any naval captain would be proud of, Bertaiola relentlessly wanders the tables inside the Locanda and outside by the river's edge, fulfilling what was once described to me as the epitome of a restaurateur's role, that of 'loitering with intent'. That he did so wearing an immaculate three-piece Prince of Wales check suit only added to his gravitas.

Bertaiola takes his responsibilities so seriously because he is obviously conscious of the history that currently rests on his shoulders. (The restaurant's excellent website includes 'postcards', views of the establishment that are both ancient, like this one, and modern.)

The village dates back to the eighth century; the remains of one bridge to the fourteenth century; while the inn itself is a mere 500 years old. As a result it has become a magnet not just for those who want to eat and drink well but also for cyclists and walkers since much of the surrounding countryside remains remarkably unspoiled.

As is the Locanda, thanks to Bertaiola's family's diligent husbandry. The visitor is consequently presented with an immediate dilemma - whether to eat inside or out, if the weather permits.

The rooms inside are covered in distinctive murals that give them the air of having witnessed change but not succumbed to it. They are also right by the kitchens that still seem rather medieval. No sooner had I put my nose into them than I was encouraged to come in by the chefs, who greeted me with a series of *Buongiornos* before going back to more immediate matters in hand. Along the far wall was a large open grill, in front of which a chef was just trimming a large veal chop, while in the room next door a young boy, wearing a football shirt, was dusting one of the tarts for dessert with caster sugar under the beady eye of a pastry chef who could well have been his mother.

The tables outside provide the opportunity not only to soak up the sun but also to hold an intimate conversation. The Mincio river flows from Lake Garda, 15 kilometres away, with such velocity in early spring that it drowns out any noise from the nearby tables, prompting my wife [that's me - JR], who has hitherto shown no interest in espionage to my knowledge, to comment that this would make it an excellent rendezvous for spies.

Bertaiola thoughtfully brings all this together in a 24-page booklet that encompasses the menu, wine list and a history of the village, all interspersed with paintings from the modern Veronese painter Federico Bellomi.

We began with an antipasto of home-cured salami curled and served on to warm triangles of grilled polenta before moving on to two of the Locanda's best-known dishes. Tortelli filled with a pumpkin purée was so sweet, and lightly spiced, that it definitely required the grated Parmesan. I chose a bowl of 'pilgrim's soup'. This early 18th century recipe begins with a clear, nourishing meat stock into which are then incorporated slices of chicken livers, morel mushrooms and black truffles with a sprinkling of cinnamon, then a luxury ingredient, around the edge of the bowl.

What followed was a much simpler but equally memorable main course. Four thick slices of eel from Lake Garda, cooked on the grill so that its skin took on a crunchy texture in complete contrast to the succulent, soft flesh underneath. Served with typical Italian restraint alongside one small piece of lemon and a single lettuce leaf, this was certainly the best rendition of eel that I have eaten outside Japan, where chefs take this ingredient very seriously indeed. My wife had a plate of first-class, lightly salted beef carpaccio with slices of raw mushroom and grana cheese.

As any enthusiastic Italian would say, *Perfetto*.

Antica Locanda Mincio, www.anticalocandamincio.it, is part of the guide to historical places to eat, drink and stay in Italy listed on www.localistorici.it