

A night in Panzano

16 Mar 2010 by Nick Lander

The dinner menu at Le Café Anglais on Monday 8 Mar was headed A Night in Panzano. But the more frequently I looked around the packed dining room and took in some of the characters, the more I began to think that I was on the set of the Marx brothers' film 'A Night at The Opera.'

There was, of course, the well-dressed straight man, hugely important and barely able to keep a smile off his face. This was Giovanni Manetti from Tuscany, whose estate was to provide the extra virgin oil, all the wines and the star attraction of the evening, the cow transformed into various cuts of mouthwatering beef.

The Harpo Marx character was played by the star turn, butcher Dario Cecchini. While the roles of harpist and butcher may seem poles apart, what each professional must have is broad hands, the former to reach across all the strings, the latter to deal with his animals. Cecchini's hands are the broadest I have ever had the misfortune to shake, his fingers considerably thicker and longer than mine. I was reminded of a photo I had seen as a little boy of the late, great goalkeeper Frank Swift of Manchester City holding seven footballs in just two hands. Shaking hands with Cecchini is not altogether a pleasant experience.

But watching him walk between the tables, embrace his guests and subsequently carve the beef with great expertise was far, far more enjoyable. And in these roles the comparison with Harpo are also valid: the immediate smile; the curly hair; and the boyish features which so obviously demonstrate that life is for eating and for fun.

This impression was enhanced by Cecchini's bright red Crocs; red trousers; a brown leather apron over an open shirt; and a long white apron with his business card clearly visible in red stitching. This read Antica Macelleria Cecchini, the name of his butcher's shop and simple restaurant based in Panzano in the Chianti Classico zone outside Florence. (www.dariocecchini@tin.it)

And as in all the best movies, the supporting cast was excellent. Chef/ proprietor Rowley Leigh, whose normally lugubrious features were almost transformed into rapture as he watched Cecchino prepare to carve the 20-odd thick *bistecca fiorentina* for the 130 guests who had each paid £95 for the dinner. (Interestingly, this event was almost 10 times as popular as the upmarket burgundy dinner offered the previous week.) Colin Westal, Leigh's head chef and longtime sergeant major was continually busy in the background. Ruth Leigh, Rowley's elder daughter, has now been working at Le Café Anglais since it opened two and a half years ago and told me that she absolutely 'loves the job, the room and my father's menu'. David Gleave from Liberty Wines had also been instrumental in putting the evening together and had brought along some other chefs and customers such as John Torode from The Luxe in Spitalfields and Theo Randall from The Inter-Continental to join in the fun. You may spot them in this short film.

We were also there to make some impression on the prodigious amounts of food. There were no fewer than five antipasti: the first, similar in colour to lardo, on bruschetta; a shredded beef salad; raw beef, described as 'sushi'; crostini with a delicious warm beef ragu; and a salad of raw sweet onions and tuna. With these were served **Fontodi 2007 Chianti Classico** [looking very direct and pure - JR].

With the main course - the beef, naturally - was served **Fontodi, Vigna del Sorbo 2006 Chianti Classico Riserva** [still pretty dense, dry and tight - save til 2012, but note that the 1999 was absolutely delicious in this [2007 vertical tasting of both these special wines](#) - JR] and the more luscious Supertuscan **Fontodi, Flaccianello della Pieve 2006 IGT Toscana**. This comprised two different cuts from the *bistecca fiorentina*, deliciously succulent, almost sweet, and served in true Tuscan style on white plates without the slightest adornment or garnish - just a side plate of potatoes roasted in Fontodi's great olive oil.

Distinctive as this beef was, it was overshadowed for many on our table by the next dish described as *carne in galera*, literally 'meat in prison'. This was a dish of the much cheaper cuts of the beef, from the shoulder mainly, that had been finely shredded, marinated in vinegar and then slow cooked for many hours. It was absolutely fantastic, unctuous but well balanced and neither too rich nor too acid.

Then slices of pecorino cheese with a very decent **Fontodi, Case Via Syrah 2004 IGT Toscana** [though definitely a side dish rather than main course Sangiovese - JR] and, finally, plates of *ricciarelli* biscuits with a glass of lusciously tangy **Fontodi 2001 Vin Santo**.

As we got up to leave, I did think that the room was beginning to sway, as though we were on an ocean liner (which Le Café Anglais does slightly resemble), but it was more likely to have been a combination of the alcohol and jetlag from [our recent trip](#). Certainly, there was no-one calling for 'two hard-boiled eggs' as Groucho Marx does so memorably in 'A Night at The Opera'. On this occasion, he had been outdone by Dario Cecchini's beef and Giovanni Manetti's wines - a great combination.

See [Fontodi's Vigna del Sorbo and Flaccianello - 2003 back to 1988](#) published in Aug 2007