

Through northern Italy with Luca Monica

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Luca Monica eats in more than 200 restaurants and travels over 80,000 kilometres around Italy every year for his food business which he runs on one simple principle. 'I only buy and sell the best,' he confessed.

In profile, which is how I saw him for most of the 36 hours he drove his Mercedes over 1000 kilometres and through four different Italian regions, Monica resembles Jack Nicholson with thick black sunglasses and his hair swept high over his head. He spends, I would imagine, as much time on his mobile phone as any movie star although he talks to chefs, restaurateurs and suppliers - I have never met anyone who gets through to top, busy chefs as he - although occasionally he is called by friends for advice on where to eat. Over the past decade Monica has also become an itinerant restaurant guide.

His firm, Longino & Cardenal's catalogue is impressive. Into Italy comes champagne and *foie gras*, caviar, Joselito ham from Spain and Wagyu beef from Japan and out goes *bottarga*, *lardo*, balsamic vinegar and Alex Nember's magnificent olive oil from Lake Garda. Monica imports little from the UK at the moment but top of his list are, surprisingly, Carr's water biscuits and, more obviously, as much wild Scottish salmon as possible.

Our first stop was the plain and greenhouses of Albegna on the Ligurian coast. 'This is an extraordinary microclimate,' Monica explained, 'similar to California's Napa Valley. The plain is 15 kilometres by 15 kilometres enclosed by the Alps and the warm Gulf of Genoa. This is where the basis of the Italian kitchen comes from for my customers and for the markets of those who live in cooler, northern Europe.'

Walking round some of the 3000 small businesses based here it was only too obvious to understand Monica's enthusiasm for this region - there were tomatoes, courgettes, aubergines, artichokes, peas, salad leaves, rocket and the indigenous thick violet asparagus. But worryingly for Monica, chefs and vegetable lovers, more and more of the growers are turning away from vegetable growing to the more profitable and slightly less back-breaking business of horticulture.

From Albegna we headed north-east to Cremona, birthplace of Stradivarius and home to the highly distinctive condiment *mostarde di Cremona*, fruits in mustard (Monica's rule in judging which is good is always to try the tangerine first). Then 30 kilometres further on to the rich, verdant Po Valley bounded by the cities of Cremona, Brescia and Mantua, countryside principally renowned for its pork and butter but home too to two of the most distinctive restaurants I have ever visited.

I was quite unprepared for my meal at La Crepa in the small, walled town of Isola Dovarese whose card describes it as a café, icecream parlour and wine shop. It does not mention that the building is 15th century, that it opened in an obviously simpler role in 1832, that it comprises several wonderful, intimate diningrooms (at the centre of one is a leg of the Spanish ham they buy from Monica) which are patrolled by two brothers, Franco and Carlo, whose combination of wine knowledge and interest in their guests' well being seems extraordinary.

As is the quality of the cooking. Dinner began gently with a small plate of polenta, local pike and capers and a plate of the local hams before moving up a gear to thin *tortellini* with a filling of St Peter's herbs. Then came two classic local dishes - a savarin of rice topped with fresh peas where the rice had been cooked so that one could taste each grain and with only enough Parmesan to hold the rice together rather than so much that it overwhelms the rice (a sin Monica levelled at too many chefs today) and their version of a sorbet, a bowl of *tortellini in brodo*, into which Franco tipped a glass of Lambrusco the local, sparkling dry red wine.

Three traditional dishes followed: a thin stew of *foiolo*, the least fatty cut of tripe, with tomatoes and finely diced vegetables; a 27-month-old Provolone, as vast as a truckle of Cheddar with their version of *membrillo*, quince jelly but spiced with mustard and a bowl of vanilla icecream topped with a teaspoon of balsamic vinegar. As I left I was not quite sure which century I was in: the cooking had been the best of a bygone age; the town walls were medieval but Monica's Mercedes was definitely 21st first century.

The following day, having visited more suppliers, we headed back to within 10 minutes of La Crepa but to a very different restaurant. Although it too is family run, with Antonio Santini running a waiting staff imbued with punctiliousness and charm and Nadia in the exceptional kitchen, dal Pescatore, set in the Parco dell'Oglio nature reserve, is renowned as one of Italy's most relaxing and elegant.

But although the restaurant's renown is worldwide Nadia does not look too far for the inspiration for her spring tasting menu. Local eel is used in a terrine as a pretext for the caviar she buys from Monica; three long, thin ravioli are stuffed with spicy *mostarda di Cremona* whilst a cube of pike from Lake Garda is sautéed with olive oil and capers. Best of all, however, is a dish of frogs' legs gratinéed with herbs - better than any French rendition of this dish.

Memorable too, and easily replicated at home, are Nadia's simple but varied uses of Parmesan. It appears first as an *amuse bouche* having been sliced extra thin and sautéed in a non-stick frying pan and then as thicker pieces on a large, glass plate that is handed round the table as a simple but memorable cheese course.

We left for Milan at precisely 1600 but it was not an entirely happy journey as Monica spoke with sadness of the distinctive foodstuffs that are disappearing from the Italian countryside. 'Grey mullet roe from Sardinia, the unique Chianini beef from Tuscany, Zoffino white beans, Castelluccio lentils, these and many more have all been lost. My job is not just to buy and sell the best but to ensure that if all these great foodstuffs are properly appreciated by chefs and their customers then their producers will be properly rewarded and never neglect them.'

La Crepa

Piazza Matteotti 13, 26031 Isola Dovarese (tel 0375 396161)
Closed Sunday night and Wednesday. Tasting menu 23.50 euros

dal Pescatore

Loc. Runate, Canneto sull'Oglio, 46013 Mantova (tel 0376-723001, web www.dalpescatore.com)
Countryside and Spring menus 120 euros

Restaurant of the Week

Fish works.

That is the only conclusion to reach after eating at an outpost of Mitchell Tonk's Fish Works restaurants which now stretch from Bath to Bristol and from Chiswick to Christchurch, Dorset.

It is essentially a very simple recipe. Fish shop at the front, fish restaurant at the back supported by a fish kitchen which also doubles as a fish cookery school. Fish lovers will realise that Fish! and Livebait have been here before.

But Tonks delivers with a sense of style, fun and comfort that the others overlooked and in two vital aspects, the crucial first and last impressions any customer takes away with them, provides an object lesson to all restaurateurs.

On the polished wooden table was a smaller, coarser wooden board with two different breads and pots of mayonnaise and pesto for dipping whilst snug next to the strong cup of Illy espresso was a square of delicious, moist chocolate cake.

These arrive on either side of a very impressive menu. Fresh anchovies with garlic and olive oil; fresh Dartmouth crab salad with tarragon mayonnaise; whole sea bream baked in sea salt and Cornish Dover sole with lemon. All this and more alongside a large blackboard which offers oysters, langoustines and the day's catch which when we last ate there included a stunning lemon sole with prawns and grilled razor clams with a lemon mayonnaise - as good as any I have eaten around the Mediterranean. Prices are fair, the wine list very well chosen and the waiting staff attentive and knowledgeable with my guest even being asked whether he preferred his scallops grilled with or without their roe.

My only disappointment was the realisation that as a table for two we were unable to order the Newlyn brill which had arrived that morning and would serve five. But I will very happily return in force.

www.fishworks.co.uk for full details.