The Italian way of eating

7 Jun 2007 by Nick Lander/FT

At 6.00pm the restaurant and the grounds of da Vittorio, the hotel and restaurant outside the small town of Brusaporto, close but not too close to Bergamo airport and 50 kilometres north of Milan, began to come to life.

Two managers were checking the layout of the tables while down in the car park several young waiters were parking their cars and then finishing the calls on their mobiles before starting work. From the other side of the hotel a young waitress was approaching the back door of the kitchen with several carefully ironed shirts over her arm.

Two hours later when we came down for dinner the scene was far more animated with a party of 20 hungry and naturally smartly-dressed Bergamesqui waiting to go through to the private room at the far end of the restaurant.

And as we followed them in and sat down at a spacious table a particularly Italian scene began to unfold. The young boy who had pressed his nose against one of the two large windows into the kitchen was immediately whisked inside by one of the chefs for a closer inspection. We were offered a vast selection of breads including the crispest grissini, made in their bakery down between the car park and the hotel's swimming pool, by a waiter wearing a very bright red pair of designer spectacles. The solicitous sommelier, who had the looks and swept-back hair of an opera singer, was more than happy to recommend inexpensive local wines including one for 30 euros. And the young pastry chef who appeared at 9.00pm to lay out a vast table with desserts, fresh fruit, ice creams and sorbets (a ritual that occurs on Saturday night, Sunday lunch and dinner) bore a striking resemblance to the subjects of several of the paintings we had seen that afternoon in Bergamo's Academia Carrara.

da Vittorio has been in the hands of the obviously very proud Cerea family since it opened 40 years ago in far more humble surroundings in the narrow, cobbled streets of Bergamo's magical 'citta alta'. Now run by the second generation, da Vittorio moved to its current site a couple of years ago and although everything about it is now far more luxurious, expensive and has to follow a more rigid structure to maintain its guide book ratings, our dinner showed that it had not lost two particular attractions.

The first, often absent at this elevated level, was the combination of the inventiveness of the cooking together with a conspicuous spirit of generosity. The interplay between the restaurant team assiduously out to please and large tables of Italians obviously out to have a very good time, with bottles of Dom Perignon and Cristal champagne as well as tins of caviar only too obvious, makes for a heady mixture. This heady atmosphere was further charged by numerous children continually drawn to the dessert table.

The second attraction is the rather odd sensation of sitting down so far from the coast and being offered a menu which since the restaurant's inception has concentrated predominantly on seafood and fish. Since then the kitchen has obviously established very strong links with the best suppliers on both sides of the Italian coast and as far afield as France for the Belon oysters which took centre stage on one of their dramatic first courses, fish and shellfish 'plain and simple' or 'nudo e crudo' in invariably more expressive Italian.

When this dish arrived on a glass rectangular plate the shellfish seemed to have been laid out like the pieces on a

draughts board. In the top left hand corner were two delicious shrimps set off in the opposite corner by thin slices of raw tuna with a mild ratatouille (it came as no surprise to note the presence of at least two Asian chefs hard at work in the kitchen). In the bottom corner were several slices of very fresh raw sea bass, offset on the other side by a roll of thinly sliced salmon topped with caviar and finally, nestling below the oyster, a warm shrimp with its shell on with a mustard sauce which I was advised to eat last.

If this dish relied predominantly on selection and preparation a more intriguing starter of fish soup ravioli called for far more ingenuity and creativity. This involved yet another rectangular glass dish on which had been laid out eight plump ravioli stuffed with the concentrated goodness of that heady mixture normally served in a soup bowl and then topped with a thin bouillabaisse and some first-class olive oil. The only comment that seemed to encapsulate the utter freshness of these first courses was the grammatically incorrect but nevertheless highly accurate phrase my wife expressed that all these, including the fish appetisers, were ‘very seay’.

There are several meat dishes on the menu including an intricate rendering of pigeon with a ragout of livers and an enticing special dish involving kid, but we stuck to fish. And although the artichoke puree with the turbot was too overpowering the highlight was undoubtedly a whole roast spiny lobster served on a wooden carving board alongside three sauces in individual copper pans and then carved at the table. This was a dish which, judging by the number of times, the younger Signora Cerea moved swiftly round the dining room to fulfil her carving role, is obviously extremely popular with those who eat here regularly. So too was the table of desserts, judging by the speed it was pounced upon by adults and children alike (surely English or American customers would have been more timid), while a magnificent, three-tiered cheese trolley stood somewhat forlornly in the background.

Although da Vittorio has left its original home in Bergamo’s ‘citta alta’ the cobbled streets of this historic area have lost none of their charm or any of their attraction for the food-lover judging by the number of interesting places to eat, drink and buy food particularly the dried wild mushrooms which are a local speciality.

We were drawn to the Antica Hosteria Del Vino Buono as much by its name as its proximity to the furnicular stop from the lower town. Set on several different levels this atmospheric and aptly named trattoria offers such a range of different dishes at such keen prices, antipasti and pastas at 7 euros each, and main courses at 10 euros that seemed foolish not to experiment. Local ham; pasta with wild mushrooms; tripe; salt cod; the local, spicy polenta, a bottle of Valpolicella and ice creams all round came to 110 euros for three.

da Vittorio, Via Cantalupa 17, 24060 Brusaporto, near Bergamo, Italy

035.681024. www.relaischateaux.com/davittorio

Antica Osteria del Vino Buono, Piazza Mercato delle Scarpe, Bergamo Alta,

035.247993. Closed Monday.