

M...M...M...Genoa

12 Jun 2012 by Neville Blech

See our [guide to all readers' restaurant reviews](#). Just one more to be published before Nick returns to occupy this slot a week today.

The power of the Republic of Genoa was at its peak during the 15th, 16th, and the early part of the 17th centuries. Here was one of the most powerful city states in Europe, controlling the Mediterranean ports with fierce determination and vying for supremacy with the states of Pisa, Naples and Venice. The ruling families of the Dorias, the Palavicinis and the Grimaldis kept an iron grip of discipline and helped Genoa to become one of the richest cities in Europe at the time.

Industry was at a high point. Did you know that Genoa's weaving and dyeing industry has still left its mark today? The city's famous blue dye - *le bleu de Gênes* - is for blue jeans as they are now known, and the special cloth that was used to be dyed came from Nîmes, in France, thus the *bleu de Nîmes* (blue denim) was created! And it was also the birthplace of Christopher Columbus and Nicolo Paganini, to name but two, as well as the birthplace, so to speak, of the *risorgimento* whence the expedition of the one thousand, led by Mazzini, Garibaldi and Marneli, departed to bring about the constitution of the kingdom of Italy.

Genoa also boasts today the largest remaining intact medieval city in Europe. The plethora of churches, with untold numbers of works of art, including works by Rubens, Van Dyck, Tintoretto and many other famous and not so famous artists, still amazes locals and tourists alike.

But Genoa, enigmatically, is a cross between the sublime and the putrid. Years of development of communist-inspired heavy industry after the second world war has left factories which now stand abandoned and in ruin, a blight on Genoa's landscape. But beneath this crumbling exterior there is a culture of good taste, including a great gastronomic tradition.

My two favourite Genovese restaurants have long been Mario and Muà. A third M restaurant has now appeared on our radar – **Il Marin**, which certainly has the most sophisticated cuisine of the three.

Il Marin is the flagship restaurant in the recently opened Eataly complex at the reconstructed Porto Antico in Genoa. For those unfamiliar with Eataly, this is a range of high-quality (and highly priced) 'natural and organic' food stores in some of the major towns in Italy (as well as one in New York and two in Japan) which were spawned by the Slow Food movement. I suppose the nearest equivalent would be the Wholefoods stores in the USA, Canada and England. I can't say that I have ever been over-enamoured by these kind of places, mainly because (a) they are not good value for money and (b) the food is no healthier than what you can get in most places. On the other hand, a lot of the food tastes better than regular offerings in the high street and the supermarkets. Unfortunately, you can't say the same thing about most of the wines.

So, it was with a great deal of scepticism that we decided to try Marin, ready to slate it as a pretentious, faddy restaurant. (They do also have a casual café within the complex, but it all seemed rather bitsy with little substance.)

Il Marin's décor is rather stark but has clean, modern lines with the tables reasonably well-spaced. There are also a few tables on an outside terrace although the views from there are not as spectacular as one might have hoped. There is a fixed-price three-course lunch menu at €34 and a four-course dinner menu at €54, but we decided to go for the à la carte selections instead. The menu is not extensive but offers a reasonable choice considering there was no meat of any kind on the menu. This is not unusual for Genoa – after all, it is a port, fish is in abundance, and it is what the Genovese do best.

Before we started, we were given a little amuse bouche of tonic water in gelatine with herbs and spices. No gin with it, I'm afraid, but it really didn't need it; it was quite uplifting as a palate cleanser and put one in a good mood for attacking the food to come. Sonia's antipasto consisted of about six different raw fish slices, tuna, sea bass, swordfish, ricciola

(yellow tail, shown here), turbot and mullet – absolutely spanking fresh and the combination of different tastes and textures made it a very fine dish (€25). My starter was a couple of chunky bits of octopus tentacle – firm but not tough – on a bed of crudités with extra virgin olive oil and a Barolo vinegar (€17). Both were well presented and tasty.

We skipped the inevitable *primi piatti* – the pasta dishes – in deference to our expanding waistlines and went on to the main courses. Here there was a choice of seven fishy dishes, including one where you could make up your own. Sonia's grilled red mullet with a purée of fennel, roasted pepperoni and beans (€18) was a little bit on the oily side, but the fish was correctly marginally undercooked so that it retained its natural succulence. The same level of undercooking could be said about the dish I had, *la ricciola in crosta* – beautifully soft, moist yellow tail in a very light crust that was perfumed with orange and served with baby artichokes and an orange mustard (€19). There is cheese with fruit compote but we decided to share one of the five desserts on offer – *bavarese ai tre cioccolati venchi* (€10) – three layers of chocolate with a ratafia, chocolate and cinnamon ice cream – the tastes here being a little too mixed up and integrated to get the full nuances of each component.

Service was efficient and knowledgeable – the wine list had 13 wines in half-litre bottles (not open carafes) and wines by the glass could be taken from the bistro. The wine list is pretty comprehensive and thankfully not confined to biodynamic or organic wines. There are about 35 Ligurian wines from good producers such as Bisson and Cantine Lunae amongst others and a couple of Sciacchetras in the six-strong Ligurian dessert list, but at €60 a half bottle they are certainly not cheap. Generally, though, wine prices are not greedy and the main list includes wines from most parts of Italy, from the Valle d'Aosta to Sicily and Sardinia, with exceptionally good value in Feudi di San Gregorio's Fiano d'Avellino 2010 at €20 and La Spinetta's Barbera d'Asti, Ca di Pian 2008 at €22. There are some token French wines, mainly from Burgundy, and at the upper end of the price scale, but who wants to drink burgundies in Genoa? Other wines that caught the eye, without going into too much detail on the list were Gaja's Rossj Bass 2010 at €55 and Antinori's Pian delle Vigne 2005 Brunello at €60. There's also a nice little selection of beers, but most of them are in 75-cl bottles.

I am not rating the restaurant because I have visited it only once and I will certainly be visiting it again soon, but in the meantime, we were mightily impressed by the finesse of the cuisine here, ably led by the young chef Enrico Panero.

The cost of a meal for the two of us, including a half litre of a very acceptable Sauvignon Blanc 2009 from Serafini & Vidotto in the Veneto and a glass of Rossese came to €116. The price/quality ratio for this experience was very good indeed.

The USP of **Muà** is the incredible value of their 'Happy Hour', which takes place between 6 and 8.30 every evening. For the princely sum of €9, you can get a drink and eat as much as you want from a buffet of pasta, pizza, salamis, ham, cheese, Russian salad, green salads, beans, cous-cous, smoked salmon and even oysters among many choices. It's a great way of filling yourself up before the opera or the theatre and it's no surprise that this has become established as the cult place to be seen among the Genovese after just two short years. Mind you, if you have another drink, that's another nine euros and of course, you can't stuff yourself any more with food. They have a good wine list and another way to profit is to buy a bottle of wine (prices start from €14) from the creditable wine list and then just pay €5 a head for the grub. Of course, there is regular dining and also a lunch menu, but the food doesn't quite match the finesse of Il Marin.

Now to the third 'M' – and our original discovery, **Trattoria da Mario**. This place is without a doubt one of the best price/quality experiences in the world. Yes, I have eaten cheaper – I had a great meal in Cuzco some 35 years ago for the equivalent of 50p, but that's another story! Mario is an unpretentious restaurant in a pretty grotty side street between the main station and the port of Genoa. It's always full, you can't book (unless you want a table of 10 perhaps) and you must be willing to share a table with anyone, who could either be a lorry driver or (as once happened to us) a millionaire who was in town to buy himself a new yacht.

There is a menu of daily fare up on a blackboard and there is also quite an extensive tattered menu if you ask for it. Most dishes are priced between €4 and €7, with main courses such as beautifully cooked sea bream being one of the more expensive. There is an exception, which we do try and have as often as we can, when available. That is the *spaghetti a l'asticche* – half a lobster with spaghetti cooked in a wonderful tomato-based sauce (almost *à l'americaine*) for the princely sum of €11. I have had similar dishes in London for £40 which have tasted no better.

That, of course, is one of the appetisers. My favourite main course is their famous *salsicche* – a foot-long ring of delicious pork sausage flavoured with garlic, spices and herbs just oozing succulence on the plate (€4). With accompanying salad (Sonia wouldn't let me have chips!), a bottle of fizzy water and a quite acceptable Chianti (you don't come here for the wines, but Titulus Verdicchio di Castello di Jesi is €7, for example) and a bottle of home-made takeaway limoncello, our

total bill for two came to €45! But if you don't go mad on expensive stuff like lobster, it's hard to spend more than €10 a head.

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www.genova.eatily.it

Muà Via San Sebastiano 13, 16123 Genova; Tel 010 532 191 www.Mua-ge.com

Trattoria da Mario Salita di San Paolo 28, 16126 Genova; Tel 010 256 469