



Written by
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Tuscan treats



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A week in Tuscany last month was very beautiful, if somewhat more expensive than it used to be.

But in its two distinctive halves – the hills of Chiantishire in contrast to the more open countryside to the south around Siena – it is still possible to eat and drink well and inexpensively. And to come to appreciate the distinctive role women play in this region's cooking and hospitality.

That was my first reaction when, at the end of an excellent lunch at Trattoria Il Pozzo in the romantic hilltop village of San Angelo in Colle outside Montalcino, our table was interested in meeting, and thanking, the chef.

In walked a small woman, wearing a white jacket and a floppy white hat half way between a cap and a bonnet, with a captivating smile. This was Paola Binarelli, who immediately told us what she is not. 'I am not a chef', she insisted through a local interpreter, adding, 'I am the cook here.' This subtle distinction between two words that many may not fully appreciate provides a clue to this kitchen's approach to hospitality.

And perhaps it was this approach that allowed Binarelli to cook for our large table (seen below before we sat down) two unforgettable dishes, a pasta dish and a dessert of such simplicity that even I was able to understand her Italian when she explained the outline of its recipe to me.



The pasta dish, which followed some very tasty crostini larded with creamy chicken livers (€6), is on her menu as 'tortelli stuffed with ricotta and spinach, butter and sage' (€10). But to these relatively simple ingredients Paola brings something special, a feminine touch perhaps, but one that captivated all of those in our large party, even the non-pasta lovers around our table. Light, crisp at the edges and yet full of flavour, these tortelli tasted as though each one had been made with love.

Perhaps Paola has a particular affinity with ricotta, the distinctive soft cheese made from the whey of cows, sheep, goat or buffalo milk. But whatever the explanation - and this recipe works as well with British ricotta as I have proved - the dessert that arrived, topped with crumbled biscuit and honey, delighted us all for its delicacy as well as for its simplicity. (Place the ricotta in a bowl. Add a little milk and whisk. Add some sugar to taste and place the bowl back into the fridge. Take it out just before serving, then add the crumbled biscuit and liquid honey just before serving.)

Il Pozzo, which celebrates its fiftieth birthday this year, occupies a building on several levels affording wonderful views over the vineyards of Montalcino from the rear and a view of the village square from the terrace at the front. Paola and her sister Franca (on the left in the picture top right) run it with a deep respect for local produce and their customers. This and her modesty combined to ensure that the memories of our meal there will live a long, long time in our taste memories. Jancis particularly appreciated their curtain below.



A drive of about 90 minutes north, around the same number of sharp bends it seemed to me at the time, took us to Osteria Le Panzanelle between Panzano and Radda in Chianti. This nineteenth-century roadside inn looks deceptively ordinary with its balcony above an old Martini sign. As we arrived for a late Sunday lunch there was more than a touch of Fellini about this osteria.

Every table in the garden was taken with large multi-generational groups at long tables, hinting at many a family drama. We were the only non-Italians in the garden until a table of four Asians came outside for coffee and cigars. All of this initially embarrassed Nada Michalesi, the restaurant's founder, who tried to explain the situation by saying, 'I'm sorry it is so busy like this but we are always very busy on a Sunday lunch.' We just sat back and enjoyed the scene - as much as the food and wine.



This restaurant was opened by Michalesi in 2002, who was then joined by Silva Bonechi and their respective partners, Paolo Moretti and Luigi Visentin, who together collate their well-presented impressive wine list. This is impressive not just for its selection of the best of the local Chianti Classicos but also for many bottles from outside the region, from Sardinia, Germany, France and Spain. Conscious of the drive to come, we enjoyed just a half bottle of delicious Isola e Olena 2015 for the ridiculously low (to Brits) price of €14.

This half-bottle of quintessential Chianti Classico provided the perfect foil for classic Tuscan food. A dish of pici, the hand-rolled pasta that is much shorter and slightly thicker than spaghetti and so more able to absorb whatever it is served with, came here with a garlicky cheese sauce that was both simple and powerful. Trippa alla Fiorentina was from the same mould, although much heartier. The best, however, was saved for the finale, their daily ice cream. This combination of a beautifully textured crema inglese ice cream topped with a dash of Vin Santo, the local dessert wine, was very good indeed.

My bill came to €75 for two including coffee. But that was a price that did not include the charms of yet another remarkably hospitable Italian woman.

Trattoria Il Pozzo 53020 San Angelo in Colle, Montelcino; tel +39 0577 844015; closed Tuesday

Osteria Le Panzanelle Loc Lucrelli 29, 53017 Radda in Chianti; tel +39 0577 733511; closed Monday