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## Fresh, simple, fantastic

By Nicholas Lander

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Three days in four of Italy's most romantic-sounding cities - Padua, Ferrara, Mantua and Cremona - provided more than enough vivid images to fill the memory card on my camera.

And while it is difficult to capture the freshness and simplicity of the food and wine on offer in this stretch of the fertile Po valley quite so easily, two instances during our last morning in Cremona seemed to highlight this region's unpretentious approach to eating and drinking well.

The first came via the fish shop close to the city's magnificent cathedral. A young man walked out carrying a large crate of mussels that he managed to wedge on to the footplates of his small motorbike. He then went back for a second that he just about got on without the bike falling over. Then he went into the shop a third time and came out with an even bigger box of clams, put them on top, clambered over this mollusc mound and set off rather precariously through the crowds of the nearby flower market. Somebody that night was going to have a great fish supper.

The same directness of approach was exemplified later by our waiter at La Lucciola, a restaurant about 20 minutes west of the city centre on the river. Consequently it was an extremely popular summer venue.

He greeted our request for a menu with a smile, replying that the restaurant had neither menu nor wine list. While for the latter we could go inside to the bar and choose from the many bottles on display, for the menu we would have to rely on his obviously well trained memory.

He began by asking us whether we would like to start with a meat or fish antipasti and no sooner had he taken this order than he walked away. Each course, it would appear, was to be ordered separately but so switched-on was the kitchen that this never resulted in any obvious delay to an excellent meal that culminated in a mouth-watering zabaglione.

As well as several top-quality food shops, Cremona also houses in Piazza Stradivari, right by the statue to the famed violin maker, a hugely stylish wine bar, il 21 w.a.y.

Although we spent only four hours in Padua, it was the city that left the strongest impression on me. Mostly, this has to do with the sheer beauty of the Scrovegni Chapel but the subsequent walk in the sunshine through this medieval university town to an unforgettable lunch at Franco Favero's Per Bacco was almost as enjoyable.

No restaurant or *enoteca* anywhere has, I believe, been as accurately named as Per Bacco or "For Bacchus". Although the food is very, very good, the wine list comprises 1,300 different wines, including numerous very expensive bottles such as two different vintages of Chateau d'Yquem, and all of these are available by the glass.

When I asked Favero how he managed to sustain this highly altruistic but seemingly financially suicidal approach to wine, his gentle face seemed to beam with the response: "Well, for the following two days the staff will obviously try and sell whatever is open. After that we'll drink it together. It's no hardship."

Nor is eating at Per Bacco, where the menu concentrates on so many of the region's excellent ingredients but with a twist: a quiche of poppy seeds; a gorgonzola mousse with filo pastry; risotto with hop shoots and herbs; and several of the best local cheeses. With a restrained number of glasses of wine, lunch for five came to €176, along with the realisation that we should have booked into a nearby hotel to enable us to return to Per Bacco for dinner.

Such is the scale of Mantua's ducal palace and Palazzo Te that it seemed eminently sensible to book into an *osteria* for lunch and the much grander Aquila Nigra, part of the 16th century complex just opposite the palace, for dinner.

The friendly and relatively basic Osteria ai Ranari certainly provided the lift five tired travellers were looking for, with its charm and speedy service and concentration on such local specialities as tortellini with pumpkin and dry, purple sparkling Lambrusco, no joke here in its homeland. And with a bill of €102 it is great value.

Aquila Nigra aims for a completely different market, with its waiting staff in dinner jackets and an impressive dining room providing a definite sense of occasion that no *osteria* could supply. Perhaps it is unfair to criticise a restaurant for lacking atmosphere when on the eve of a bank holiday it was obviously quieter than usual, although some of the food was good, particularly one dish of tiny local shrimps with courgettes extremely finely diced on a mandolin.

But the management at Aquila Nigra had one lesson to teach restaurateurs worldwide. As soon as we each pronounced our preference for still or sparkling water, the waiter changed our water glasses accordingly. Those that ordered sparkling water kept their clear glasses while for those who ordered still water blue ones were substituted, making the waiter's role far more efficient and, even more importantly, leading to far less interruptions in our conversation.

There was another important lesson to be learnt from reading the menu outside Ristorante Max in the square next to Ferrara's hugely imposing castle. While listing some of the more obvious antipasti and pasta courses, the main courses were entirely fish based, a selection that caused a certain amount of dissension in our ranks.

We went in to discover a restaurant that, although it had not been much changed physically for some time, had come into the hands of two highly talented chefs,

Marco Beni and Riccardo Scalambra use this long-established institution to show off their skills with four very different but ultimately highly complementary ingredients: fish; cheese; wine, of which their selection includes many bins from outside Italy, and chocolate.

The presence of exemplary talent in the kitchen was obvious in several dishes: aubergine parmigiani with shrimps, prawns and orange rind; monkfish tripe with polenta; and a perfectly grilled soaso, a fish similar to turbot that is native to the Adriatic. The brief dessert menu concentrated on an exquisite chocolate mousse and plates of the chefs' own chocolates filled with the most unusual combinations - chestnut, pumpkin, pepper and beer - were excellent: distinctive but not shocking.

While all of these restaurants were new to me, this trip also provided the opportunity to return to one of my favourite and most atmospheric places in Italy: La Crepa in Isola Dovorese, 15km east of Cremona. Housed in a building that in the 15th century belonged to the Duke of Mantua, it is now run by a family who still use the vaults for their original purpose - to house salami and wines. On the ground floor brothers Franco and Carlo run a food and wine shop, café, gelateria and restaurant, all of which - to judge from the pictures on the wall, the style of the cooking and the ridiculously low prices on the menu - can only be summarily described as "from another era".

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