



WORDS ELISABETH KING

PARTY TIME IN ITALY

THERE can't be a foodie alive who hasn't heard of the S. Pellegrino World's 50 Best Restaurants List. Yet the mineral water brand that is a default choice for most Australians when they book a table at an Italian restaurant also sponsors the annual S. Pellegrino Cooking Cup. An event that may not have much resonance with regular folk but ranks as a sort of global MasterChef cook-off for young chefs.

Held in Venice every June, 2011 marked the 11th time some of the world's top young chefs (the age limit is 30) held on to the contents of their stomachs and their utensils to rustle up their signature dishes in tiny galleys aboard a small flotilla of yachts. A tough enough task if boats are stationary. But a daunting challenge when you're juggling pots and pans as the kitchen lists from side to side during an 18km race that traces the coastline of Venice's famous lagoon.

The budget for this glamorous international affair is \$1 million or thereabouts. Australia, the eighth largest market in the world for S. Pellegrino, is always a fierce competitor and Adelaide chef, Melanie Gowers, took out top honours in 2008. Our man at the helm for 2011 was Soren Lascelles, from Assiette restaurant in Sydney, who lists Liam Tomlin (formerly of Banc and now based in Cape Town) and ex-pat culinary stars such as David Thompson, of Nahm, and Brett Graham, of The Ledbury in London, as his mentors. It showed, too, in the succulence of his roast lamb glazed with black sugar and served with garlic, spiced eggplant and spinach puree, which clinched the Aqua Panna People's Choice Award and earned Lascelles a third-place ranking overall.

To be frank, the 150 guest, three-day shindig was one of the best events I have ever attended, beginning with a stay at the Hilton Molino Stucky. A restored 19th century flour mill on Giudecca Island, the hotel's wonderful rooftop pool and bar offers panoramic views of Venice and the best bellinis in the city. The gala dinner to announce the winners of the gruelling sailing/cooking contest was held on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore. A fitting end to a lengthy day that started with the 11 international contenders staging a dawn raid on the renowned Rialto fresh produce market and ended with a leap from their own yacht on to the judges boat, the Timotei, with their finished dishes in hand. A greasy burger would have tasted sublime in the 16th century cloisters of the magnificent Renaissance church designed by Palladio. But Emanuele Scarello,

president of the Jeune Restaurateurs d'Europe, created a Venetian menu that was as matchless as the cloudless summer sky overhead.

The next stop was Tuscany and, better yet, we followed an itinerary that could be replicated by most travellers if you don't include such lavish flourishes as a "chic-nic" at S. Pellegrino's Medicea Aqua Panna estate and a dinner cooked by Michelin-starred chefs in the medieval town of Scarperia, complete with costumed dancers waving Palio-style flags. We stayed at the Villa La Maschere, about 29km from Florence and, frankly, gorgeous is the only description for this 16th century palazzo surrounded by an 18ha park reaching down to the shores of Lake Bilancino. Breakfast on the terrace is the ultimate Tuscan dream vision of straight-as-a-dye poplars, vineyards and air hazy with the smell of herbs.

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I've already decided that in my next life I am coming back as a member of the Frescobaldi family. For 30 generations this Florentine clan has presided over the largest wine holding in Tuscany. Over 5000ha of vines covering five estates, including the idyllic vision that is Castello di Nipozzano. A defensive fortress built in the year 1000, the surrounding 626ha spread lies in the heart of the Chianti Rufina region and its wine cellar and convention rooms are popular for corporate showing-off events. As we sipped on glasses of Montesodi Riserva, produced only from Sangiovese grapes grown in the Montesodi vineyard in exceptional years, the sight of the exquisite buffet table groaning with Tuscan specialities such as ribollita and bistecca alla fiorentina completed a fantasy that no one wanted to end.

It was time to head north to sample more water than wine. I don't know why but I imagined the town of San Pellegrino Terme to be little more than a grease-spot on the highway sort of place, notable only for being the location of the S. Pellegrino bottling factory. But back in the day this fade,

yet ravishing town, only 75km north of Milan, was northern Italy's most glamorous spa destination. Like Karlovy Vary in the Czech Republic, San Pellegrino Terme once attracted the Who's Who of European royalty and the rich and famous of the early 20th century, who came here to gamble away fortunes in addition to improving their health.

Nearly one billion of the famous green bottles bearing the red star are exported from San Pellegrino Terme every year to over 120 countries, and there are big plans afoot to turn the town into one of Europe's glitziest beauty and health centres in time for the Milan Expo in 2015.

Over the next three years, the Percassi Group, a global leader in spruiking prestige fashion and luxury brands such as Benetton, Ferrari and Calvin Klein, will invest between 130 - 140 million euros to create "the most beautiful hot springs in the world".

French star architect, Dominique Perrault, who designed the much acclaimed French National Library, won an international competition to design the new spa complex. Located on the site of the old San Pellegrino bottling plant, Perrault's soaring, almost cubist structure will contrast starkly with the gentler, more curvaceous architecture of the neighbouring Grand Hotel, which Percassi says will boast a seven-star rating, grand apartment complex and upmarket fashion mall when it re-opens.

Every corner you turn reminds you of San Pellegrino Terme's past and it's a very illustrious one. The town's spring was famous in the 13th century, attracting pilgrims and the poorly from all over Italy. Leonardo da Vinci visited the area in 1509 to study the geology that produced the waters he labelled "miraculous". Close your eyes and you can easily imagine the high society days when guests as disparate as Gabriele d'Annunzio, poet, journalist and all-round wild boy, and Queen Margherita, the first Queen of a united Italy, came here to eat and drink in the fashionable cafes and restaurants and to "pass the waters". And it's still a very smart thing to do.