



WORDS ELISABETH KING

ROME TRUTHS - A GUIDE TO GOOD EATING AND DRINKING IN THE ETERNAL CITY

At the end of a hard day tramping the streets of Rome to make sure you don't miss any item of interest in the Eternal City, the last thing you want to do is wander far from your hotel for dinner. Which is how I found myself in a trattoria called Mama Angela's. Ignoring one of the most important tenets of that wise old American adage, 'Never play cards with a man called Doc. Never eat at a place called Mom's'. And never, ever sleep with someone whose troubles are worse than your own - we plonked ourselves down in the middle of the evening meal rush hour.

Trouble started at once. The Canadian couple next to us was seething with tension. She had an Italian background and was taking her husband, who was clearly of Scottish descent, to Italy for the first time. Over a plate of largely uneaten and very glutinous scallopine al limone, she announced to no one in particular, "I never thought I would get a bad meal in Italy."

Normally, I stay away from restaurants that local guides award four 'Es' - as in euros - but it's worth a splurge in Rome for the sort of dining experience that makes you feel you've wandered into a movie set. Many of the best restaurants in the Italian capital are in major hotels and the pick of the bunch is La Pergola in the Rome Cavalieri hotel (www.romecavalieri.com). The man in charge of the menu is German-born Heinz Beck and the Michelin 3-star eatery is rated as the finest restaurant in town. Beck, like Gordon Ramsay, is an international player and is also in charge of Apsley's at the Lanesborough Hotel in London, which picked up its first Michelin star this year. St Peter's Cathedral seems close enough to touch, there are 53,000 bottles in the wine cellar and I almost swooned over the zucchini flowers stuffed with taleggio.

When breathtaking vistas beckon, La Terrazza dell'Eden (www.hotel-eden.it)

we were ushered to one of the best tables in this most elegant of poolside restaurants. Come early because it will take you a long time to work through the vast wine list, which veers from artisan-style boutique wines to the most expensive Brunello di Montalcino. I allowed the sommelier to select a pinot grigio to go with the acqua pazza rockfish I ordered and also followed the waiter's advice to finish the meal with a white chocolate mousse covered with creamy citrus nougat. A perfect run-up to the following evening's meal at Filippo La Mantia (www.filippolamantia.com) where the wine list is 100 per cent Sicilian - "except for the champagne", revealed the waiter. Named after the head chef, the restaurant has a menu that's contemporary Sicilian but relies on traditional recipes.

Me, actually, I love true Roman food, which is often based on offcuts and offal and is austere flavourful in the

You will never look askance at offal meats again after dining on the hearty oxtail dishes flavoured with hoof marrow.

It was hard not to lean over and say, "Honey, it's time you ditched your parents' nostalgic fantasies and got around."

Not only in visitor-packed Rome, but also in Florence and Venice, where the locals contemptuously refer to the summertime onslaught of tourists as the Corso del Gente (loosely, flood of people), there's a lot of restaurants serving the sort of Italian food that would get the thumbs-down in comparison to canned spaghetti. Overcooked cannelloni that tastes like cat food wrapped in lino. Spaghetti carbonara with the consistency of glue. Pizza slices with only one or two slices of tomato as a topping. On top of that, service is prison canteen fast and the waiter manages a ghastly glimmer of a smile only when the bill is presented.

If there's one place where you need a guide to good restaurants, it's Rome.

dishes up the Roman skyline along with menu listings such as perfectly cooked carrot gnocchi with potatoes and saffron and breaded lamb cutlets in an olive crust. George Clooney and his rat pack mates holed up at the Hotel de Russie (www.hotelderussie.it), British hotelier Rocco Forte's Roman outpost, for three months during the filming of the movie *Ocean's Twelve* and often ate at the property's Le Jardin restaurant, which overlooks the Valadier Gardens where Picasso and Stravinsky once strolled. Chef Nazareno Menghini serves up Mediterranean-inspired dishes such as sea bass with black olive pate on a bed of stuffed fennel.

Thankfully, the head waiter at Baby Dell'Hotel Aldrovandi Palace (www.aldrovandi.com) mistook my 'travelling necklace' of cubic zirconia for diamonds so

best possible way. La Pergola may have scored three Michelin stars but to native-born Romans the greatest restaurant in the city is Checchino dal 1887 (www.checcchino-dal-1887.com). You will never look askance at offal meats again after dining on the hearty oxtail dishes flavoured with zampa (hoof marrow), kidneys alla romana and liver cooked in over a dozen ways. The wine list is predictably long and so is the grappa list in case your digestion needs a helping hand.

At Ad Hoc (www.ristorante-adhoc.com), the wine list is the result of continuous and meticulous research, with 400 labels from all over Italy, 30 grappas and 10 vertical tasting labels. Many of the bottles form a major part of the decor, too, and add an extra note of authenticity to the formaggio di rossa cheese, Chianina meats and seasonal

in the pink

MadFish Sangiovese Rosé

★ ★ ★ ★ **Top of Category**
Winestate Magazine

game that chef Lorenzo d'Amico cooks in extra virgin olive oil from the restaurant's own presses. In a building built by the Pope in the late 1400s, ancient Roman columns from the second century AD add to the 'only in Rome' ambience. A close association with Antinori ensures that the wine list is strong in top-flight Tuscan wines, too.

Caravaggio would probably be diagnosed as bipolar these days, but in his own times he was seen as very passionate. Al Duello is named after the famous duel between the painter and his friend Ranuccio, who didn't survive the occasion. One of the best dishes on the menu is Caravaggio's artichokes which is linked to another violent episode, when the maestro nearly strangled a waiter who brought him the 'wrong' dish of the vegetable. The restaurant also works hard-to-get providore ingredients such as cacciofiore cheese, mini-rocottas from Tuscany and spinosini pasta with two types of botargo (fish roe) into its constantly changing menu.

Even though every street in Rome is awash with bars, the most exclusive wine bar in town is the Casa Bleve (48-49 Via dei Teatro Valle), located in the former courtyard of the 16th century Palazzo Medici Lante della Rovere. Here is Rome's finest selection of wines by the glass and you can also visit the wine cellar which is not only full of priceless bottlings but the intact ancient Roman walls date back to the first century AD.

But a friend suggested that I try the Camponeschi Winebar (www.ristorantecamponeschi.it) in the toney Piazza Farnese. He was spot on. Not only was the bar menu far superior to the average, but the 600 wines on offer helped to while away a large chunk of a quiet Sunday evening. A favourite tippale was a pinot grigio from the bar's own vineyards. Fresh and tangy on the middle palate, it proved more than enough to wash away the bad tastes and dreadful memory of Mama Angela's. 🍷



www.madfishwines.com.au