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Boccondivino, Milano



IT'S ALL about textures, colors, and smells. A bit of this changes that. A touch of that gives you this. It's the way you put it together that makes it art.

Art inspires collectors and great art inspires collectors with passion. People that strive to find the unique and exceptional. Searching

through the countryside to find that new artist or bearing the expense of acquiring the work of an old master. One day their collection becomes so significant that it is too important for one person and cries to be shared with the world.

There's a collection like this in Milano and it is open to the public for their pleasure and amazement. The neighborhood is plush. The massive grey stone walls of the palazzi are only broken by giant heavy wooden doors towering thirty feet over the pavement. Once in a while as you walk along the street you can sneak a glimpse through the open windows into the luxurious apartments above and peek at the well-tended giardini though the tall gilded gates. This is a neighborhood where you feel underdressed if you're not wearing a coat and tie to walk the dog.

The museum that houses this collection is unremarkable in this stately neighborhood. Only a small sign and a warm light from the window is there to guide you. Don't let the understated exterior fool you. Inside rests some of the greatest art that Italy produces. Best of all it tastes as good as it looks.

This is Boccondivino -- a ristorante that is not about what they cook in the kitchen, but is all about the collection they have assembled of the finest affettati (cured pork products), formaggi (cheeses) and vini produced in Italy. They seek out the creations of artists and blend them into a symphony of flavors, textures, aromas and colors. The conductors at Boccondivino are the father and son sommelier team of Luigi and Fabrizio Concordati. When you eat here there is no menu and the first course, a colorful pinzimonio, is already waiting. You are more than welcome to pick your own wine, but why bother when the Concordatis are there to lead you through the evening. Boccondivino means a divine mouthful, and they do not disappoint. Boccondivino is a beautiful frame for artwork created by others.

The ristorante is warm and woody with an elegant casualness. Every evening Boccondivino is packed with boisterous Milanese dressed in everything from Armani to blue jeans -- well, some of the blue jeans are Armani (this is Milano after all). On the sideboards sit carefully arranged platters of ultra-thin slices of affettati, and the heavily laden cheese cart looks rich and decadent in the golden candlelight. While there is one cooked course that arrives at your table, it is more of an intermezzo between the meats and the cheeses than a star in its own right. Be prepared: your eating capacity is about to be challenged by the irritatingly slim Italians around you who will clean every bite from each of their plates.

In a restaurant you normally interact mostly with the waiter and just a bit with the sommelier. At Boccondivino, the sommelier is your only guide for the evening. The waiter simply delivers the courses. Your host and companion will either be the distinguished Luigi, or the enthusiastic Fabrizio. Either will arrive at your table with his

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silver tastevin sparkling in the light, sporting the Italian Sommelier Association blue blazer and red tie. They have selected every delicious bite you will experience during the evening and will carefully explain each with respectful understanding of the artisan who created it. There is only one choice to be made. Do you pick your own wine or do you surrender all control? For the Concordatis, seeking complimentary combinations from their collection is their passion. With pleasure, I place myself in their hands.

The pinzimonio waiting at the table is the perfect start. Without asking glasses of frothy, fruity Prosecco Brut arrive. Pinzimonio is the Italian version of crudites or dipping vegetables. However, they are not cut into bite size bits, but served whole and arranged in a bowl with the skill of a florist making arrangements for the Ritz Carlton. At Boccondivino each vegetable in the arrangement is a piece of fine art, hand selected one-by-one for both beauty and flavor. On each plate is an empty dipping bowl that you fill with fragrant extra virgin olive oil, a splash of Balsamic vinegar and a generous grinding of fresh pepper and salt. Brilliantly red tomatoes, luminescent green celery, radishes, bright white heads of fennel and crisp carrots are waiting in the bowl to be cut and dipped in the peppery oil. This signals the end of your low fat experience for the evening. As the vegetables are whisked away a platter of crostini spread with chicken liver pate arrives, but that is not the special part. In the center of the platter is a bowl of burro salato di Alto Adige, an extra creamy, salted butter from a small dairy in the mountains of Alto Adige. It is to be spread on the toasts to add another layer of richness to the liver. Fabrizio arrives at our table with a bottle of 2001 Arbiola Monferatto Bianco. A blend of 70% sauvignon blanc and 30% chardonnay aged in barrique. He seems crestfallen when we tell him we have tasted the wine before. This is an event that will not reoccur the rest of the evening. The wine is oaky with pronounced sauvignon herbalness. It is a little heavy-handed for me, but a good match with the crostini. Before the crostini have disappeared, a plateful of palline di formaggi arrives. These are small, breaded and deep-fried balls of Taleggio and Gorgonzola. They are rich with just a hint of the pungent flavor of Gorgonzola -- another good match with the wine.

Platters of affettati arrive in the dining room and Fabrizio deposits red wineglasses on the table. Now it's getting serious. The waiter arrives at the table with the first platter and repeats the process seven more times before our first tasting of affettati is complete. Fabrizio returns with the red wine: 2002 Stefano Mancinelli Lacrima di Morra d'Alba a bright fruity, fresh wine from le Marche. On our plates are Lardo di Trentino, Prosciutto di Parma, Prosciutto di San Daniele, Mortadella, Coppa di Piacenza, pancetta and Salame di Felino. The brilliant fruitiness of the young wine matched with the salty affettati is amazing. Each pushes more flavors out of the other. Every razor thin slice of meat is astounding, melting in your mouth and growing in flavor as you slowly savor each piece. The Salame di Felino at Boccondivino will spoil your palate for other salame forever.

Affettati includes the whole range of cured pork products made in Italy. Every part of the pig is used and each region has its unique specialties. It's dangerous to be a pig in Italy. It's impossible to imagine an important meal without a full range of these meats being offered as antipasti and they are the foundation of the wonderful panini (sandwiches) which are the real fast-food of Italy. Even the smallest grocery store will have a broad selection and your order of prosciutto will be carefully sliced and wrapped, almost gift-like, to be sure that it arrives at your home in perfect condition.

Some major types of affettati are:

- Prosciutto Crudo: a salt and air cured uncooked (crudo) ham that is considered the pinnacle of flavor and elegance in affettati. The most famous types range from the most delicate to the fullest flavored -- San Daniele from Friuli, Parma from Emilia Romagna, and Norcia from Umbria. Outside Italy when you ask for prosciutto this is what you get.

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and herbs from similar sources may, when you eat for prosciutto this is what you get.

- Prosciutto Cotto: a cooked (cotto), usually boiled ham. Smoked (affumicato) versions are also produced.

- Pancetta: this is the same cut of pork we commonly call bacon, but pancetta is produced by different methods. Regular pancetta is cured not smoked, and it is rolled into a sausage-like shape. Smoked pancetta is also produced and is similar to American bacon, but is meatier. Speck is a meaty pancetta produced in Trentino/Alto Adige. It is smoke and herb cured and more closely resembles Prosciutto Crudo than regular pancetta.

- Lardo: falls in the pancetta family, but because I like it so much, I will give its own spot. Lardo is fat -- that's it. It is the pure fat portion of the bacon cured in salt and herbs and then served very thinly sliced. It melts on your tongue like soft butter. I have not yet checked the American Heart Associations daily recommended portion of Lardo, and no, this is nothing like the American lard that you buy in a tub and that my grandmother used to make her extraordinary pie crusts.

- Bresaola: salt cured beef from the mountains of Valtellina in Lombardia. Very lean.

- Coppa: salt cured, and air dried pork from the neck and shoulder. Coppa is traditionally produced in Lombardia and Emilia Romagna. It is meaty with a rich, red color.

- Mortadella: really a sausage, but often included on a plates of affettati. Delicate, pink and creamy in texture it is made from pure pork which is laced with slices of fat for richness. Sometimes pistachios are added for an additional flourish. True Mortadella is only made in the area surrounding Bologna. That is why Americans call their bland imitation of Mortadella bologna -- what baloney.

- Salame: there are more types of salame than there are regions of Italy. Everyone has their specialty. Salame is usually made from pork, but there also many varieties made from wild boar, donkey, venison and horse. All are made with cured meat and fat. The differences in styles are dependent on how finely the meats are chopped, the ratio of fat to meat and the seasonings used. Salame can also be smoked.

At Boccondivino there is not one course of affettati, but two. The second is reserved for smoked meats and it is served separately to prevent the smoky aromas from overwhelming the flavors of the more delicately cured meats. The waiter soon arrives with three more platters. A smoked ham, Speck and a smoked pancetta. These are rich, pungently smoky meats and Fabrizio arrives with just the wine to handle them. The 2001 Forti Terre di Sicilia is a ripe yet fruity blend of nero d'avola and cabernet sauvignon. The smoked flavors of the meats combine with the ripe, smoky flavors of the wine in perfect harmony. Just when you think you are done, he returns with the Prosciutto Crudo di Norcia, an exceptionally rich and salty cured ham from the famous town of hog butchers, which he slices -- by hand -- at your table.

This is an affettati tour de force. Where to go next? Perhaps a refreshing intermezzo like risotto con Gorgonzola and pappardelle con radicchio, Speck and cream. As your last plate is taken away a new plate arrives where your waiter deposits healthy (using the term loosely) portions of each rich dish. To loosen our palate with these piatti, Fabrizio arrives with the 1998 Goretti L'Arringatore, Colli Perugini from Umbria. The stiff backbone of this sangiovese blend cleaned our palates of the previous courses and contrasted beautifully with the voluptuous choices on our plates.

As you finish the last bite suddenly you remember the cheese cart and sure enough new plates and wine glasses arrive at your table. The first cheese course is truly a cream course. Three fresh cheeses grace your plate: Ricotta Pugliese, Mozzarella di Bufala

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Campana and the decadent Burrrito di Andria -- the cream laden fresh cheese from Puglia. No new wine is brought for these treasures; they are just too delicate and rich.

Yet another round of plates arrives simultaneously with the overloaded cheese cart. Like the wine you can choose or they can choose. If they choose they only ask, "Dolce o piccante?" Directly translated as sweet or spicy, the question means a choice between mild or pungent cheeses. At this point pungent was the only choice and my selection included Tomini di Castelmagno from Piemonte, aged Bitto de Morbegno from Valtellina in Lombardia, Forni Fossa di Talamello from Marche and a milky golden chunk of Parmigiano Reggiano that reminds you that, in fact, this is a cheese made from milk instead of that rock hard stuff they export. So as not to let down the cheeses, Fabrizio pulls the cork on a 1999 Masi Grandarella -- their new quasi-Amarone. It is made from a blend of late harvested and dried refosco, carmenere and corvina, making it sort of a super-Venetian as they call it on the back label. It is a big wine (15.5% alcohol) with a touch of sweetness and huge fruit flavors go well with the full flavored cheeses. Still, it is no Amarone.

Just when your palate screams for help due to sensory overload, a medley of zesty fruit sorbetti (green apple, peach and lemon) arrives to sooth. Not a minute later, Fabrizio arrives with a bottle of the golden Taramis Vino Liquoroso from Sicilia. Its rich sweetness and warm flavors (16% alcohol) make the perfect dunk for the plateful of almond and walnut biscotti that arrive with the bottle.

After much needed espressi the grappa arrives. The potent Pagura Riserva, distilled from a blend of refosco and cabernet, weighs in at a full-throttle 50% alcohol and sends a crescendo of warm feelings to every remaining nerve in your body that still has the strength to feel.

Then after only four hours it is over. Both Concordatis arrive at your table for a review of the evening. There is not much you can do other than applaud them as you would applaud a chef who enters the dining room after a spectacular achievement.

With a bit of effort you rise from you seat and wander out into the cool of the Milano night. There are no glimpses of the apartments now. All the shutters are tightly closed and it is dark, gray and calm. The walk feels good after the hours of eating and drinking and somehow the palazzi seem even more regal in the dark.

I love art.

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