

Romano dei Romani

Charles Scicolone (November 17, 2008)



Five of the Best Traditional Restaurants in Rome

Rome is my favorite city. Se fosse un uomo ricco abiterei a Roma -- If I was a rich man I would live in Rome. As if the magnificence of the city were not enough, the food also makes me want to return whenever I can.



In September, I was invited to a Sagrantino tasting in Montefalco in Umbria. The tasting ended five days before our cruise of Sicily, Malta and Tunisia. I did not want to come back to New York and then leave again five days later. Michele knew what I was thinking and said, "let's rent an apartment in Rome for five days." My answer was, of course, "Perche No?" .

I met her at the Rome airport after the tasting and we took a car to the apartment on the Via Giulia in the heart of Rome.

Roman friends often recommend restaurants that they like. Usually these are not restaurants that serve traditional Roman food. I can understand this because they live there and can have Roman food whenever they want. But the restaurants they want to send me to serve sushi, or put foamy sauces on the food, and generally work very hard to be very inventive. This would be fine if the flavors or the Italian ingredients came through but in most cases this is not so. The basis for all Italian food is freshness and simplicity, like traditional Rome cooking. When I am there I eat the same things all the time.

The only city I have been to more times and know better is New York and that is because I live there. The routine the first afternoon we arrive in Rome does not change. We drop off our bags and walk to restaurant Da Giggetto (39- 066861 105) at Portico D'Ottavia 12 A, in the Jewish ghetto. This time it was a perfect sunny afternoon and the restaurant was crowded. But we were able to sit outside facing the Tiber with a view of the synagogue. I do not need to look at the menu because I always order the same things: fiori di zurcca ripieni con mozzarella e alici (small and crunchy but very good), carciofi alla giudia (fried artichokes) and spaghetti con vongole veraci. The clams were small and tender with just the right amount of parsley, garlic, olive oil and a hint of hot pepper. Michele had il filetto di baccala (she loves the way the Romans fry) and the puntarelle in salsa d' alici , her favorite salad. We sipped prosecco with our meal in the bright autumn sun.



Michele likes La Campana, Vicolo Della Campana 18

(39-06-6867820), we arrived without a reservation and got the last table for two. If you call even a few hours before you can always get a reservation except for Sunday lunch when many Roman families eat out. The fried stuffed zucchini flowers here were bigger than those at Da Giggetto with a different coating. The mozzarella filling was rich and creamy with just the right amount of anchovy flavor. The roasted porcini could not have been better and the maiolino arrosto con patate was excellent. Michele always orders the puntarella con alici salad and said this one was very good. For dessert I had fragolini con limone and zucchero.

We passed Pierliugi restaurant(39-06-6861 302) a few times as it is around the corner from the apartment and it looked very appealing with outside dining in the picturesque Piazza de' Ricci 144. The restaurant that we wanted to go to for lunch the next day was closed, Michele said "let's go to Pierliugi" It was still early so we made a reservation for 1:00 PM. When we returned at that hour, there were many empty tables because Romans eat late. Never go to a restaurant before 12:30 for lunch or 8:00 for dinner. The restaurant might not be open and if they are you may be the only one there. Pierliugi did not fill till 2:00 and after 2:30 the owner was still adding tables to the outdoor space. It had been a number of years since I had been here so I needed a menu. The waiter was very friendly and when he heard Michele point out that they had ricci di mare (sea urchin) to me, he made her repeat the translation a number of times. He said he had been trying for years to find out the English meaning and no one else could tell him.

We shared a Catalana Salad, with shrimp, seppie, potatoes, slivers of red onion, parsley, cherry tomato halves, rughetta and lots of extra virgin olive oil. Michele loves this type of sea food salad and this was one of the best. Next I had pennone with alici ragu, a hint of hot pepper, a touch of tomato, fresh alici and a sprinkle of bread crumbs. I finished it all. They had scampi on the menu any way you like it.

In some restaurants when you order scampi they serve you shrimp. I want langoustine. It is almost impossible to get them in America. The waiter assured me they were langoustine "proprio"

and I ordered them grilled. They were perfect with a little olive oil

drizzled over them! As a side dish I ordered carciofi alla guida, they were crisp and crunchy, fried to perfection. They were the best I had in Rome. We drank Frascati Superiore 2007 from Casale Marchese which was very fruity. The wine list



was interesting because under each wine was an explanation of how it was aged, in acciaio (steel), barriques (small oak barrels) or botti (large barrels). The waiter suggested a wine aged in barrique. When I told him I did not like wine aged in barriques, it does not go with food, especially Italian food, he did not understand. I explained that it would be like him drinking a cappuccino after lunch or dinner. It was a running joke for the rest of the meal. This was one of the best fish meals I have ever had.

The first time I went to Il Matriciano ,(39-06-32500364) Via dei Gracchi, 55, was in 1981. It is one of my two favorite restaurants in Rome. Over the years nothing has changed. It is a family run restaurant and one of the owners, a brother and sister, always has lunch at the same table. We sat outside and the tables around us filled quickly. As usual, I ordered zucchini flowers (I cannot get enough of them) to start. These were perfectly deep fried with a small amount of mozzarella and more than a hint of anchovies. I ordered the bucatini alla matriciana. Along with one or two others, this is the classic Roman pasta. Some places serve it with rigatoni but it is not the same. Then I bucatini alla had abbacchio (baby lamb) roasted with potatoes. It was cooked to perfection, moist with crisp skin. For desert I had tiny fragoline, wild strawberries, and gelato. The 2005 Aglianico from Feudi San Gregorio went very well with the pasta and the baby lamb. I consider this the perfect Roman meal. In the afternoon it is quiet and I have sometimes seen Italian T.V. stars eating here. At night the restaurant is the most Roman of Roman restaurants. Sometimes it looks like it a scene from the movie La Dolce Vita, full of Romans who all seem to know each other and are having a good time. On Sunday afternoon and at night it is best to make a reservation.

At Checchino dal 1887 (www.checchino1887.com [2]), Via di Monte 31 Testaccio. Francesco Mariani takes care of the front of the house while his brother Elio is in the kitchen. It is the best restaurant in Rome for both wine and food with over six hundred wines from Italy and all over the world. I always have long conversations with Francesco about Italian wine and which wine I should order with what I am eating. This time he even remembered the wine I ordered when I was there two years ago. They no longer have any Fiorano Rosso or older vintages of Colle Picchione "Vigna dal Vassallo". They did have a double magnum of the 1989 but there were only two of us so I did not order it.

Many years ago we arrived in Rome and were planning to go by train to

Genoa. At the train station, we were told that there was a one day strike by the train workers, but there would be a train coming from the south. It would stop in Rome at four and then on to Genoa before heading to

Paris. As it was only noon, what would we do for four hours! We looked at each other and said "Checchino". We found a cab and arrived with all of our baggage. When we explained the situation to Francesco, he quickly whisked the bags out of sight and said that he would call the station at 3:30. We had a wonderful meal and were just finishing the last drop of *caffè*, when Francesco came running into the dining room. "The train is arriving early," he said, "there is no time for a taxi." We quickly threw everything into his car and raced to the station. We jumped on the train as it was starting to move with Francesco handing up the luggage. We never could have done it without him. The train was packed and we stood all the way to Genoa, seven hours.

This time I ordered the tasting menu because it had all of my favorite foods. I started with a *tortino* of eggs, peppers and tomato, this was followed by *pasta alla Martricina* (yes again). It could not have been better. Then rabbit (*coniglio alla olive di Gaeta con rughetta and pomodoro*) followed by *torta de mele* (apple tart). The Fiorano Semillon from Alberico Buoncompagni Ludovisi from the '70's was listed as a dessert wine. I asked Francesco about this and he said that it was the nature of the Semillon grape and the way in which they were made. The same wine is being sold in New York as a dry table wine. I always found these wines to be a little oxidized which I believe adds to their charm. Francesco recommended the 1975. It worked great with the *torta*.

Testaccio, where the restaurant is located, is where the slaughter houses of Rome used to be and the *vaccinari* (slaughterers) and the *scorichini* (tanners) once lived. Checchino has many specialties based on "innards" that cannot be found anywhere else. Its specialties include: *coda alla vaccinara*, *abbacchio alla cacciatore*, *la trippa*, *bucatini alla gricia*, *rigatoni con la pajata*, and *bue garofolata* which is a recipe developed and owned by the restaurant.

Checchino is a member of L' Unione di Ristoranti del Buon Ricordo, a group of restaurants that give you a plate if you order their signature dish or tasting menu. We have almost 100 of these plates and six are from Checchino.

Osteria da Giovanni Ar Galletto ,Piazza Farnese 102 (39-06-686-1714) located in a corner of the Piazza Farnese. It is cozy inside but the view from the tables outside is more interesting. If you get the right table, you can face the fountain in the middle of the piazza along with the French



embassy where the second act of the opera Tosca by Puccini takes place. We always try to sit outside but this time it was too chilly so we went inside.

I started with the usual, zucchini flowers followed by pasta all'amatriciana and then abbacchio scottadita, grilled baby lamb with a touch of rosemary. I believe they are the best in Rome. Michele had penne all'arrabbiata and the baby lamb. They have two menus one is piatti pronti (prepared dishes, maialino or abbacchio del forno) and piatti dei giorno. I always order from the piatti dei giorno menu. They have pajata di vitello (calves intestines) but I will have that next time. The owner is a man of a certain age, with a large gray mustache and walks around the restaurant making sure everything is going right. His wife sits behind the counter watching him and everything else. For desert we both had fragoline con gelato.

These are my favorite restaurants in Rome the ones that I return to time and time again. At present I do not have any plans to return to Rome in the near future but one never knows.....

Next time an interesting tasting and judging in Siena.



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