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Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire

Dublin Institute of Technology, mairtin.Macconiomaire@dit.ie

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Osteria di Passignano

Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire Ph.D.
Dublin Institute of Technology, Mairtin.Macconiomaire@dit.ie

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Osteria di Passignano

Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire approaches gastro-heaven via the winding roads of Tuscany

Having spent the morning between Florence's Central Market, introducing my daughters to the various anatomical parts of the pig, purchasing pashminas for all our close female acquaintances, and visiting the church of San Lorenzo to be awestruck by the magnificent marble carvings of Donnatello and Michaelangelo, I raced back to our lodgings in the heart of Chianti to deposit my wife and children at the pool. I hoped to reach Osteria di Passignano before lunch service concluded.

I sped through the Tuscan countryside fighting the clock, thinking I needed to be there by 2pm, arriving at 2.03pm and being extremely relieved on seeing last orders were actually at 2.15pm. I had visited the Osteria two days previously as part of a tasting of Antonori wines, and had garnered a copy of the menu from manager Marcello Crini. Wasting no time I ordered the tasting menu (€45), a glass of Tenuto Guado al Tasso Vermentino from Bolgheri (€4) and a bottle of sparkling mineral water (€4).

The Osteria is located next to the historic Badia di Passignano abbey, founded in 395AD by the archbishop of Florence. Monks from the Vallombrosian Order, a branch of the Benedictine order specialising in viticulture and forestry, still live there but the surrounding vineyards have been sold to the Antinori family who mature their Chianti Classico Riserva di Badia di Passignano in the cellars under the monastery. Marcello Crini, a connoisseur and enthusiast of Tuscan oeno-gastronomic culture opened the restaurant (Osteria) in 2000. The kitchen philosophy is based on using top quality local ingredients, particularly bread, wine and oil, reinventing classic dishes from the surrounding region and breathing new life into the traditional.

I had sampled the Vermentino at the wine tasting and felt this elegant white would compliment my meal favourably. As I savoured its bouquet, a basket containing six types of bread arrived. The varieties ranged in shape, flavour and

texture from crisp square flatbread and long grissini to soft aromatic rosemary and sea salt focaccia, croissant-shaped sweetish bread made from Egyptian organic flour, and both brown and white traditional Tuscan breads made using the sourdough method. I was approaching heaven, and when the young waitress placed a tasting of three olive oils from Sicily, Tuscany and Lake Garda in front of me as an appetiser I thought Saint Peter had just opened the gates. The oils were served warm with a few chickpeas and croutons in each to assist the diner to savour the different flavours with contrasting textures. I tasted slowly and methodically, sucking in air to enhance the oils' delightful pungency on my palate. The Sicilian was hot and peppery, while the other two varied in aromatic intensity but were equally good.

My first official course was 'zucchini and saffron flan with its stuffed flower': a mousse encased in a timbale lined with grilled slices of courgette, placed on a purée of courgette and topped with deep-fried courgette flower leaf. This was partnered with a stuffed flower adding to the subtle contrast in texture, flavour and tonal shades of green within the dish – magnificent. 'Red tortellini filled with eggplant and Pecorino on zucchini purée' followed. Three perfectly formed tortellini topped with fried leek, strips of pecorino and a cordon of olive oil assured that each morsel was masticated clinically in order to disseminate singularly and savour collectively the combined flavours.

A change of cutlery (a single fork) for my next course, 'large water and flour spaghetti with seasonal mushrooms and wild herb pesto'. The flavours were fabulous: funghi porcini (piglet mushrooms, or 'ceps'), morels and other local varieties married with a hint of white wine, cream and tomato concassé and tossed with fresh pasta. My only complaint was an over generous the portion which, considering the amount of courses, definitely took its toll.

I considered changing wine for the



two forthcoming meat courses, 'roast pigeon breast with its stuffed thigh and asparagus bouquet' and 'spiced veal fillet with chunky eggplant chutney'. Curiosity was goading me to sample a glass of Solaia (€20), a combination of Cabernet Sauvignon, Cabernet Franc and Sangiovese from the Solaia vineyard situated next to the famous Tignanello estate, to see if it really was some kind of magical nectar, or just expensive by exclusivity. Two factors helped me resist; firstly there was already a feeling of hedonistic warmth and well-being rising within me, and secondly I still had to negotiate the winding Tuscan roads and resume parental duty (having told my

wife I was going to have two quick courses to get a feel for the restaurant).

The pigeon breast was served pink with its crispy and gamey stuffed thigh, coupled with fresh crisp asparagus spears wrapped in pancetta. The veal was extremely tender, with an unusual coating of herbs and spices, principally cinnamon, giving a Moorish or Middle Eastern feel to the dish. By the time a fabulous trio of desserts arrived, I was nearly beaten. Consisting of a mini pear crème brûlée, rich chocolate pavé and raspberry sorbet in a brandysnap basket, this was the perfect finish to the meal. The brûlée was light and the richness of the chocolate was cut by the tartness of the sorbet. I

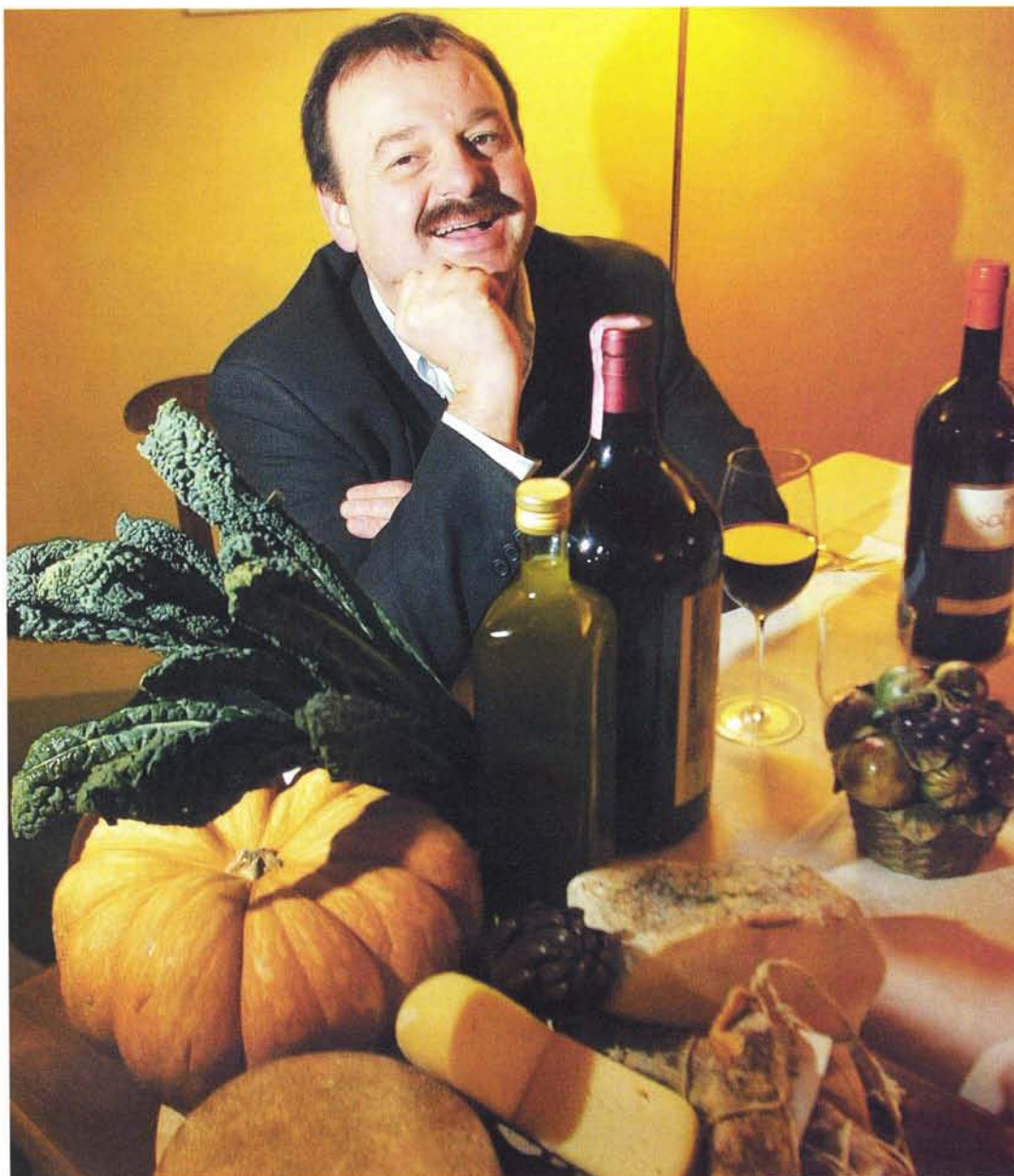
declined coffee and the head chef Matia Barciulli, who had introduced himself during the meal, brought me on a tour of the kitchen where he revealed some of his key ingredients and techniques. On returning there was a strong espresso waiting on my table along with a plate of assorted petit fours. The food was great value but they clearly make their money from a richer clientele than I, who would not blink at the €150 bottle of Solaia, €375 bottle of Montrachet or the €600 bottle of Penfolds Grange, all available from the extensive wine list. 🍷

Osteria di Passignano
Badia di Passignano, Tuscany
 Tel (+55) 8071278

This page: manager
 Marcello Crini

Photography
 courtesy of Osteria di
 Passignano

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Upside
 Simple Tuscan flavours brought to new heights

Downside
 A long way to go for lunch!

Alternatives?
 There are many significant restaurants in Tuscany

Verdict
 Unmissable for any oeno-gastro-enthusiast touring the region.