

Cognoscenti magazine

Because life is short

Antica Osteria del Teatro
Piacenza, Italy

Set in the theatre district amidst a maze of narrow pedestrian streets, the restaurant **Antica Osteria del Teatro** occupies the ground floor of the most ancient continually-occupied structure in Piacenza, a provincial Northern Italian city. Dating from the 14th century, the building has a number of intriguing architectural aspects, but as visiting **Cognoscenti Magazine** editors were to shortly discover, the restaurant has much more than antiquity going for it.

At the beginning of our meal, we enjoyed *Il piatto di culatello di Zibello con porcini sott'olio*—the *culatello* being the best part of Parma ham. The meat was flake-dry, almost “chipped.”

Next, in *Il tortelli dei Farnese al burro e salvia*, the spinach- and ricotta-filled ravioli were enriched by the subtle addition of sage. Olive oil is important but not for everything, chef Filippo Chiappini Dattilo said in an exclusive interview with Cognoscenti editors after the meal; in this dish, for example, he uses butter.

Elements were nicely contrasted in *Il trancio di fegato grasso d'anatra marinato al banyuls con gelatina alle spezie*: a rich and sweetish *foie gras* with a dark, strong, peppery jelly and an astringent, almost caramelized vinegar served with fresh lettuce.

In *Il tagliolini alla chitarra al profumo di rosmarino con polipetti alla mediterranea*, rosemary combined splendidly with the squid. It was clear: Mr. Dattilo is a master at marrying flavors.



An elegant dining room

In *La composizione d'agnello da latte con timballo di melanzana viola e pomodori ramati*, tender baby lamb was accompanied by a timbale of eggplant, tomato and spinach.

The *dessert del “Teatro,” La pesca gialla ripiena agli amaretti e cacao con sorbetto al maracuja*, was peach with a delectable chocolate-amoretti topping, an exceptional passion-fruit ice cream served on the side.

As a young man, chef Dattilo studied engineering before turning to his true passion: gourmet cuisine. In 1985, he opened Antica Osteria del Teatro. Although crowned with a Michelin star, the chef doesn't rest on his laurels today. When he emerged from the kitchen halfway through dinner to greet clients, he lingered only briefly—after all, he had work to do.

Recently the chef's industriousness has extended to authorship, with a collection of his top recipes published under the title, “La Cucina a colori”—loosely translated as “Colorful Cuisine.”

The chef explained that a good dish must offer three elements: (1) color and presentation, that is to say, *appearance*; (2) taste and subtlety, or *quality*; and (3) finally, *quantity*. He traces dual aspects in his cuisine—regional and creative—each of which is represented by a separate tasting menu at the restaurant. Influences of French cuisine are evident such as, for example, in his use of foie gras. When the chef uses olive oil, he draws from various regions of Italy depending on the dish: from Liguria for fish because of its light and floral flavor; from Tuscany for salad; and from Umbria for meat. As we were to observe over dinner, the chef's aesthetic impulse shows a strong tendency to organize food symmetrically by staging mounds of food in arrangements of 3's, 4's, and 5's.

Spearheaded by headwaiter Tiziano Barani, the floor staff was generally professional. Visiting editors noted a single *faux-pas*: a *Grappa* which had not been ordered was brought to our table. We grinned at the bottle in puzzlement for a long moment before it was removed and taken over to another table.

Fortunately, something better awaited us: the 1965 *Laubade Armagnac*. This liquor had dwelled for some 35 years in cask before bottling in 2000. It was distinguished by flavors of caramel, intense orange and spice, and a fine, silky finish—an alcoholic syrup of surpassing richness for those with a taste for it.

This '65 Armagnac was only one small treat from an impressive wine and spirits collection. Years of astute purchasing by Sommelier Giancarlo Grassi and Chef Dattilo have yielded a very impressive collection. In the restaurant's climate-controlled cellars rest 1400 different wines, around 9,000 bottles are aging,

including consecutive or nearly vertical holdings of Mouton and Lafitte reaching from 1960 to present—and, needless to say, a first-rate selection of the most famous of Italian wines.



The bar boasts a fine selection of Armagnacs and other liquors.

After sampling a local sauvignon white, the *Colli Piacenti La Tosa 2000*, a pleasantly fruity wine with a touch of sweetness, we continued with the considerably bigger red 1995 *Pelissero Vanotu Barberesco*—tannic, with concentrated and jammy fruit, and exhibiting impressive legs in the glass.

We enjoyed chatting with the restaurant's veteran sommelier, Giancarlo Grassi, regarding a matter which is much discussed in informed wine circles these days: decanting wines vs. not. In this perpetual debate, Mr. Grassi

comes down on the side of serving wine directly from the bottle. By decanting wine prior to consumption, he insists, valuable “perfumes are released.” Oxidization is necessary, he acknowledges, but adequate oxidation occurs in the balloon glasses in which reds are usually served. We countered with a suggestion: that decanting may be appropriate for certain wines—those that no method other than decanting could open.

This article was written by Jeffrey Riggs and other contributing editors to *Cognoscenti Magazine*.

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