

Cognoscenti magazine

Because life is short

LA TENDA ROSSA
CERBAIA, ITALY

La Tenda Rossa is the story of a passionate journey. The restaurant began in 1972 as a “family adventure,” named after the arctic adventure film of the same name: *The Red Tent*. To the challenge of operating this small dining establishment, the extended Santandrea family has brought skill and delicacy which have earned them no less than two Michelin stars.

Lacking the flashy metropolitan locale of other restaurants, La Tenda Rossa (about 10 miles outside of Florence) must attract its customers mainly by the excellence of its cuisine. Lying in the Chianti region of Italy, the restaurant draws on both “wine” and “cultural” tourists, as Sommelier and Co-Manager Natasha Santandrea explained to **Cognoscenti Magazine** editors in an exclusive interview.

The décor is sophisticated and stylish. A bronze statuette adorns each table, in a different pose each time—a rather refreshing change from the usual bouquets of flowers. Base plates and napkin holders are in a beautiful pewter.

The menu reflects the family’s diverse Italian roots, drawing inspiration from the country’s varied regions.

The cuisine is, as Ms. Santandrea put it, “the south, the north and the center of Italy all combined.” The approach is classic: to source the finest culinary ingredients, regardless of their origin—some locally, the rest from as far away as Iceland, as the search for quality dictates.



*Style and haute cuisine at
La Tenda Rossa outside Florence*

Due to concerns about the effect of what might be termed “cultural imperialism,” the menu is in Italian only — Ms. Santandrea prefers to translate it to foreign visitors. She is happy spending 30 minutes explaining the

menu to the curious or linguistically confused, adding (with a smile), “and then we can talk about other things.”

For the antipasto, we chose *Medagioni di capesante croccanti allo zafferano, in vellutata di funghi porcini alla maggiorana con virgola di extravergine a crudo* (scallops in mushroom velouté). The velouté was just as it sounded: velvety and unctuous. Swimming therein, tender breaded scallops hinted at lemon. Our other

antipasto, *Ostriche gratinate*, showcased baked oysters in a splendid and briny broth.

For each dish, Ms. Santandrea suggested a different glass of wine. The first white was a *Primopresso* 1999 (Tuscany). This interesting Chardonnay exhibited a pencil brightness with a deep and oaky frontal burst and a slight hint of sherry afterwards.

Next came the pasta dishes: *Raviolini di branzino, con punte di asparagi e funghi chiodini*, or ravioli with asparagus spears, and *Cannolini da sfoglia ai semi di finocchio selvatico, con dadolata di agnello al rosmarino*, or cannolini with lamb. The pasta was perfectly cooked, although one might have hoped for greater flavor contrast.

Accompanying the latter was the star of the meal, at least in terms of wine: a precocious red, the *Enrico Fossi* 1999. This Syrah showed rich garnet and purple color shading to pink at the rim, with caramel and cinnamon also present.

Ms. Santandrea buys the wines for the restaurant in consultation with her father. Through long experience, she explained, “you can feel the life of the drinker and the life of the wine itself come together, as they must—two lives in a relationship.”

For main meals, we had turbot in *Filetto di rombo chiodato, con “griglia” di patata allo zafferano su macedonia tiepida di pomodoro, melanzane, fagiolini e capperi*. The turbot’s subtle flavors were accentuated by the more daring additions of olives and capers. The pigeon with truffle-porto sauce in *Petto di piccione, farcito sottopelle con le sue rigaglie e fegato grasso, in salsa di Porto e Tartufo Nero*, was perfectly cooked, the *foie gras* powerfully present, and the sauce almost strawberry-like in color. The eggplant accompaniment did not contrast effectively enough.

Here came our second red wine, a 1990 *Sangiovetto* from the Chianti region, still young and tannic in the glass, with flavors of cherry and lead—for those familiar with French wines, one might say that it resembled a Burgundy rather than a Bordeaux.

Desserts were *Crostatina di fusti di bosco con gelato di more, in cialda al sesamo con gocce di balsamico*, a berry frivolity, and *Crema soffice al caramello con uvetta sultanina e nocciole caramellate in millefoglie di cialde di farina di castagne*, with a delicious caramel sauce and pistachio nuts. The 1996 *Muscato Rosa* dessert wine added an almost port-like richness to close the meal.

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

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La Tenda Rossa

Piazza del Monumento 9/14
50020 Cerbaia Val di Pesa
ITALY

Phone: (39) 055 82 6132

Email: latendarossa@tiscalinet.it