



Palazzolo sull'Oglio

The tall Torre del Popolo, the symbol of the city of Palazzolo, announces the town from beyond the Oglio river on which it sits and across which its (sloping) Roman bridge is found.

Known in the 19th century as 'little Manchester' because of its role as an industrial centre, it still has a certain energy about it. Especially when major football matches are being screened and the bars around Piazza Roma and Piazza Vincenza Rosa erect stacked seating to accommodate the enthusiastic audience.

Osteria della Villetta
Maurizio Rossi and Maria Grazia Omodei

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Opening hours: 12.00 - 15.00; 19.30 - 24.00
Closed: all day Sun and Mon; dinner on Tues and Wed
Holidays: 1 week in Jan; 2 weeks in Aug

"Traditional cooking requires time", explains Maurizio Rossi, "so people eat things here that they don't have time to make at home. Things their grandmothers and mothers used to cook for them."

And it's traditional food that's the focus of the menu at Osteria della Villetta, housed in a striking mint-green villa a few small steps from the quiet local train station of Palazzolo sull'Oglio. The Rossi family have been working in this building since 1900, when they moved their original osteria from around the corner. Maurizio is the fourth generation to supervise the offering of good food, good wine — and good socialising.

Because it's not just about the food. The social side and community involvement has always been important. Back in the 1950s the osteria had the only television in the village. There's still an evocative photograph on the wall of people watching an early broadcast.

Maurizio took over from his father in 1989. When he was younger, he had only helped out a little, occasionally serving at tables or making coffees, as his parents were keen for him and his brother to study. Which they did but Maurizio couldn't resist the pull of a professional life in the osteria. Nor the attraction of the Slow Food movement, which he's supported from the very start.

His wife Grazia remembers those years fondly "because for us Slow Food went beyond the idea of what one eats. It was a big socially transformative project." It's not surprising that they were excited by these ideas as they'd met when both politically active — and very young. In those days, Grazia says, smiling, "I thought I'd change the world."



But away from the political campaigning, it was life as normal back in Palazzolo when Maurizio's mother told Grazia on first meeting her "he's the best looking, the most intelligent, the most bravo." "She thought quite highly of me," Maurizio smiles.

Opposite centre: Grazia

As did Grazia. Marriage was next and a mere two months later life changed again when Maurizio took over the management of the osteria from his parents. Back then, Grazia taught children with learning difficulties. She went part-time when their son was born, and from that moment helped out in the osteria too.

When Maurizio's mother died, Grazia stepped into her head cook's shoes and took over the kitchen despite having no formal training. But having worked alongside Maurizio's mother she knew that no changes were needed. "We want to keep a culture of straightforward food that's at risk of disappearing. It's our ambition to pass on the baton — to preserve this way of cooking and socialising together," she explains.

Maurizio feels that "cooking should have deep roots. One shouldn't just improvise and make it up because improvised cooking doesn't have a history. Form should never overtake substance. A dish should never look better than it tastes."

But although it's a place that is unrepentantly attached to traditional recipes ("tripe, bollito, polpetta and stoccafisso on Friday"), that doesn't mean that these haven't been fine-tuned. Nowadays vegetarians say that this is one of the few places that takes their choices seriously. The kitchen uses less butter than earlier generations and favours extra virgin olive oil from nearby Lake Iseo.



Above: Maurizio and Grazia

But unlike the dishes, praise for the food hasn't diminished in the slightest. Even the great chef Alain Ducasse declared, "The food you eat here tells you that you can be nowhere else." And Italy's near-deified culinary maestro Gualtiero Marchesi (a particularly big fan of the *polpetta*) included the osteria in a list of his 11 favourite places to eat. In the world.

But the couple were already big fans of Marchesi's for another reason. "His food's very clean. There's never an imposition of tastes but a combination," as Maurizio puts it. And that's the problem he has with lots of today's chefs who "overlap too many tastes so that you no longer know what you're eating".

It's not all tradition, however. Both Maurizio and Grazia are modern art enthusiasts. This interest is visible in the many drawings on the wall (some done on the paper place mats) by some greats of Italian modern art: Mimmo Rotella, Arnaldo Pomodoro and Valerio Adami among them.

Of course, old things are appreciated too; the interior of the osteria is substantially as it's been since Maurizio's parents' day. He knows that La Villetta has a certain magic. Not only is it full of soul, but of old curiosities: scales, an accordion, a meat slicer, an old chequers board, a fruit juice-



pressing machine from the 1950s and a *bollito misto* vessel from a large hotel in Torino from around 1890. It's a treasure trove.

Which may be why the designer Jasper Morrison chose the osteria as the place for the photo shoot of his new range of Alessi crockery. And Michelangelo Pistoletto, who Grazia believes is "not just an artist but a great intellectual", introduced a new project here.

The large mirror has been there since the beginning — well over a century — but was important for more than just aesthetic reasons. Maurizio's father would sit in the chair at the back of the side room from where he could see the bar. And it enabled his grandmother to see what was happening in the kitchen from the main room. "An early security camera," says Maurizio.

These days Grazia doesn't need a mirror to know what people need. She has, it seems, eyes in the back of her head. She now runs the kitchen as if she's always worked there, keeping control with a smile. And she'll go out to tables to check that all is OK then glide to the till to take a payment. She's fast but organised and methodical, gracefully changing beat in time with the alternating rhythms of patience and urgency, of brigade encouragement and diner demand.



She also looks after their son, Jacopo, and is both intrigued and proud that he has "an amazing palate". He knows if the sausages have been made with different seasonings — but then sausages, rice and vegetables is his favourite meal. Like Maurizio's parents, Jacopo's are keen for him to "study and have his own experiences" before choosing whether he wants to work in the osteria or not. If he does, he's sure to be as efficient as his parents who have set a great example.

On a busy lunchtime, diners sit down and are quickly served a glass of their choice. Perhaps Franciacorta fizz from a mere 5km away. Given a beautiful plate of bread they either sit quietly relaxing after the morning's work or chat to their neighbours. There's an understanding that lots of people who come for lunch need to get out quickly and that others have more time to linger. No matter. All are made to feel welcome and eat as they wish. "We do a lot of business at lunchtime," says Maurizio. "Managers arrive, angry and after a couple of hours, they leave happy and calm again. People don't just come here to eat but to relax and put the brakes on the speed of everyday life."

Which sounds easy, but he understands that "the simple things are the hardest to do well." The couple must be succeeding. Marchesi defined La Villetta as "the quintessential osteria".

It's certainly like them: stimulating, fun — and unapologetically authentic. "There are lots of restaurants that want to seem like old osterie but they're not," says Maurizio. "La Villetta is *'un posto vero'* and as real as it's always been."



Involtini di Verza

Savoy Cabbage Rolls

Grazia serves her involtini alongside a guanciale bollito with salsa verde and a beef patty, but they are substantial enough by themselves. Breadcrumbs are an important part of the filling so be sure to use good quality bread.

SERVES 4

| | |
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| 200g cooked pork loin, chopped – not too finely | 300ml meat stock |
| 110g pork sausage, cooked and chopped – not too finely | 8 Savoy cabbage leaves, or more depending on the size of your leaves |
| 80g matured Grana Padano, grated | Olive oil |
| 55g breadcrumbs | 1 onion, finely chopped |
| 1 small egg, beaten | 50g pancetta, chopped |
| Salt, pepper and grated nutmeg, to taste | |

To make the filling, mix in a bowl the pork, sausage, Grana Padano, breadcrumbs, beaten egg and seasonings. The mixture shouldn't be too dry so add some meat stock if necessary.

Lightly blanch the cabbage leaves. Drain and spread them out on kitchen towel to dry. Divide the filling between the cabbage leaves, then roll them up and close like a package.

Heat a small amount of oil in a non-stick pan and lightly fry the onion and pancetta. Cover the bottom of the pan with heated meat stock and put the rolls to simmer gently for about 20 minutes, adding further stock if needed. Serve while warm.

Wine suggestion: Sparkling – Franciacorta Extra Brut DOCG, Ferghettina (Chardonnay, Pinot Nero)





Pesche Ripiene Stuffed Peaches

Grazia uses "beautifully ripe peaches", but this recipe will enhance fruits that are less than perfect.

SERVES 4

4 peaches
25g Amaretti biscuits, broken into
fine crumbs
25g savoiardi biscuits or sponge
fingers, broken into small crumbs
25g ground almonds

2 tbsp Marsala
Knob of butter
½ tbsp caster sugar
50ml water

Pre-heat the oven to 180°C.

Cut the peaches in half, remove the stones and place the halves cut side up in an oven dish.

In a bowl, mix together the biscuit crumbs and the almonds. Add the Marsala to form a paste. Fill each peach half with this mixture and put a small amount of butter on top of each one. Dissolve the sugar in the water and pour enough into the bottom of the baking dish so that it's thinly covered. Bake in the oven for 10 minutes.

Remove from the oven and add more sugar water if needed. Return to the oven for another 10 minutes. Remove the peaches from the oven, turn them upside down to remove their skins and serve with the cooking liquid.

Wine suggestion: Fortified wine – Pinodisè, Contadi Castaldi (Chardonnay)