



Andria

Andria is approximately 18km from the extraordinary Castel del Monte, an enormous octagonal stone castle, and a majestic example of Swabian architecture atop a lonely peak of the Murge. The city of Andria itself has its own charms: a cathedral, fascinating churches such as San Francesco, San Domenico and Sant'Agostino, and a quaint confectionery museum — *Confetteria Mario Mucci* — whose factory has been creating all manner of sweet treats since 1894. Then again you may need a sugar fix after coping with the bustling Andrian *passaggiata* and the local driving.

De la Poste, Locanda

Nicola Montereale and Stefania Nenna

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Opening hours: 13.00–14.30;
20.00–23.00
Closed: Sun evening and
Wed
Holidays: Aug (all month)
Covers: 40 inside

The chef and owner of De la Poste, Locanda is chatting to us about cooking and the excellence of the local produce. Suddenly he breaks off. He points to the piano in the corner of the restaurant and smiles, remembering the many customers who have taken to the keyboard after a few grappas and publicly crooned to their partners. So does he ever serenade Stefania, his wife, who heads up the dining room? “Only with my dishes,” he laughs.

Welcome to the world of Nicola Montereale and his restaurant, which, as its name suggests, you will find opposite the central post office in Andria. If you can find it, that is. The charming, rustic interior hides behind a chic, smoked glass entrance, which is easy to miss. Try not to, though; you would also be missing elegant, stylish cooking that hints at both local and international influences and that is more than matched by an excellent wine list.

Dining has long been connected with this site, although it was decidedly less sophisticated in the 1500s and 1600s, when people used to leave their horses outside the post office while taking refreshment. Still, it's a link that appeals to Nicola. In fact, links and continuity of all sorts appeal to him, most obviously the link between good food and good wine, which may explain why he took a sommelier course — and why he and Stefania have one of the most highly regarded wine lists in the north of Puglia.

And that's no mean achievement for a place that opened in 1999 with a much more limited choice: two wines and two waters to be precise. De la Poste, Locanda now boasts an extensive range; and local ones tend to be popular with visitors, while the regulars can choose from a broad selection that takes in other regions of Italy as well as international producers.

Apart, obviously, from wonderful food and a fabulous wine list, an essential aspect of running a successful restaurant, says Nicola, is to have a regular dialogue with your clients — and more importantly to listen to what they have to say. And that's where Stefania comes in. Engaging and efficient, she is the perfect embodiment of Nicola's philosophy of restaurant management.

Of course she lets you know what's on offer, but for her it is more than mindless reciting. She offers the sort of support that is vital in a restaurant where the printed menu can only provide a guideline and backdrop to the daily specials — specials that are taken very, very seriously. She has, by the way, an almost freakish recall of what customers have eaten and drunk both on the day and in past visits. Fads, favourites, preferences, prejudices — she remembers them all.

In contrast to Stefania, who is friendly and effusive, Nicola is calm, almost serene, until, that is, you broach the subject of cooking with fish. Then he gets quite animated. Firstly, he says, the fish must not be imported but "*dai nostri mari*" — "from our seas". Then there's the personal dimension he brings to the local produce. He loves experimenting with influences he's acquired from working elsewhere in Italy and with chefs from other countries. The oriental influences of ginger, soya and algae are a current favourite, and raw fish sushi-style.

But always balanced. "I don't do heavy dishes," he says, "but light dishes with vegetables and fresh fish. I link elements from the sea and the earth, but in a way that one doesn't swamp the other." And, he adds, always using fresh, seasonal vegetables. His favourite times of year are spring and autumn, the seasons of change. Fresh produce is abundant at this time, and for him the arrival of different vegetables is a time of renewed excitement.

And speaking of excitement...the thrill of their recent, and long-awaited wedding may be subsiding, but there's now the ongoing renovation of a house in the historic centre of Andria. They've been supervising the revamp for over two years now, and even though there's still a fair way to go, it's clear that it will be stunning when completed.

And after that? Nicola talks diffidently and obliquely about projects he may have planned for the future. Stefania, meanwhile, muses candidly on the possibility of converting the huge cellar in their new home into a restaurant.

It would certainly have a lot to live up to. Nicola may joke about serenading Stefania with his dishes but, better than that, as a duo they have brought food and wine together with style and welcome in — what would you call it? Perfect harmony, perhaps?

Clockwise from top left:
The restaurant piano, used for occasional public crooning.

Nicola's Aubergine and Roast Pepper Terrine.

Stefania and Nicola outside De la Poste, Locanda.



Orecchiette con Pomodorini, Rucola e Ricotta Dura di Andria Orecchiette with Cherry Tomatoes, Rocket and Ricotta from Andria

A simple but delicious pasta that gives Nicola the opportunity to use local produce.

SERVES 6

2kg cherry tomatoes, quartered

Extra virgin olive oil, garlic and salt to taste

500g orecchiette, or other fresh pasta if not readily available

2 bunches rocket, washed, and if large leaves, halved/chopped

150g hard ricotta from Andria, or matured hard cheese

Cook the tomatoes with the oil, garlic and salt for 5 minutes. In a separate pan, cook the orecchiette for a few minutes and just before they reach al dente, mix in with the tomatoes (where they will continue cooking). Keep a few attractive rocket leaves to one side for garnish, and add the rest to wilt. Serve immediately with shavings of hard ricotta and the saved rocket leaves.

Wine suggestion: White — “Rampone”, Valle d’Itria IGT, I Pastini (Fiano Minutolo)



Fiori di Zucchini Farciti con Calamari Scottati Stuffed Courgette Flowers with Sautéed Squid

Nicola often serves this with large prawns, but squid is an option for days when the prawns aren’t up to his standards.

SERVES 10

300g of sea bass, cleaned, filleted and chopped

5 basil leaves

50cl fresh cream

1 large egg white

Salt and pepper to taste

20 fresh courgette flowers

20 thin slices courgette

500g carrots, peeled and sliced

Extra virgin olive oil

Vegetable stock as necessary

For the squid:

10 medium squid, cleaned and quartered

Extra virgin olive oil

1 garlic clove, peeled and left whole to flavour the oil

Thyme

For the sauce:

1 leek, chopped

1 white onion, chopped

Prepare a stuffing by blending the chopped sea bass with the basil leaves, the cream, the egg white, salt and pepper. Blitz in a blender. Stuff the courgette flowers, and wrap a thin slice of courgette around each flower to keep everything closed and in place. Leave to rest for about an hour in the fridge, so that the stuffing settles in the shape of the flower. In the meantime prepare the carrot sauce by gently frying the leek, onion and carrots in olive oil. Finally add the vegetable stock, and leave to simmer for a while. Liquidise everything, to give a creamy sauce.

Bake the stuffed flowers in a 180°C oven for about 5 minutes. While the flowers are cooking, sauté the squid in the olive oil with the garlic and thyme, using a non-stick frying pan.

Serve 2 flowers per person, laying them carefully on a spoon of carrot sauce with the sautéed squid on the side.

Wine suggestion: White — “Marese”, Castel del Monte DOC, Rivera (Bombino Bianco)



Antichi Sapori Pietro Zito

Piazza S. Isidoro 10
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T: +39 0883 569 529
www.antichisapori.biz

Opening hours: 12.30–14.30;
20.00–22.00
(Reservations essential)
Closed: Sat evening and Sun
Holidays: Easter, Jul (20 days),
few days either side of 15 Aug,
Christmas (one week).
Covers: 35

In 1998, there was trouble in the village of Montegrosso. Pietro Zito's restaurant was vandalised. He decided to close. The villagers disagreed. He had to continue, they said, and they would help him. People worked through the night to repair the damage and get the restaurant back on its feet again. That is at least some measure of what Antichi Sapori and Pietro Zito mean to Montegrosso.

Pietro is a gifted cook, but he doesn't claim his passion to be food and cooking. His enthusiasm, he says, is for "agriculture, nature and the earth". The *territorio* informs everything that he does. He goes on to say, however, that his real qualification is "being born here – a farmer".

This feeling for the land wasn't fashionable during Pietro's early years in the business. "Fifteen years ago, restaurants in Puglia were very different," he says. "Restaurateurs didn't believe in their own *territorio*. When we went out to eat we ate salmon and béchamel and those sorts of combinations. If you ate food from your *territorio* you were transported to the past, and that meant poverty."

But Pietro didn't see it that way. His mother made simple food based on local vegetables, pulses and homemade pastas. It was delicious. That was good enough for him. So when, with family help, he opened his osteria a decade and a half ago, he put their money where his heart was and gambled that the locals would feel the same way about well prepared home cooking. Antichi Sapori has been full every day since.

And the formula hasn't changed. Thus, unlike many restaurateurs who go to markets, Pietro goes directly to the neighbouring farmers. "*Il mio supermercato è la campagna*. The countryside is my supermarket," he says. In keeping with this, and the simplicity of his traditional dishes, he barely tweaks them. "I don't want

to upset traditional, proven combinations because if I do that I'll lose my roots," he explains.

One consequence of his extraordinary success has been the regeneration of the village of Montegrosso. Younger people are returning, and the residents even help with vegetable harvests and jam-making. Pietro likes the fact that inadvertently he's created a community of like-minded souls whose feet are firmly rooted in agriculture.

And meeting his father, Francesco, it's clear that the apple didn't fall far from the tree. Francesco, a quiet, charming man, not only played a major part in revamping Antichi Sapori but goes out every morning to forage for wild plants on the Murge. For all his mildness, he's fierce in his criticism of what is happening to one of the most valued wild spaces in Puglia. "It's wrong that people are cultivating here," he says. "It should all be left wild. Some days I have to cover 20 kilometres to gather what I used to in one. Plants we ate raw when I was a child now have to be cooked, and their intense flavour is lost. We're losing nature." He explains that, being from the country, he doesn't wash the fruit. "It tastes so much better straight from where it's grown to your mouth. If you buy it from a shop, you don't know how many hands have touched it and every time produce is touched, it loses some of its taste."

Pietro Zito in Antichi Sapori





Not if his son has anything to do with it, it doesn't. And it's not just the quality of his food but the quality of his life that Pietro treasures. Hence the astonishing, many said suicidal, decision to close during the big-taking sittings of Saturday evening and Sunday lunchtime. "It was a life choice," he says simply. "This is hard work and, if you don't draw a line and enforce a limit, you'd collapse." The same thinking dictated Pietro's decision to downsize the restaurant from 60 to 35 covers in 2005. In any case, the higher the number of customers, the less time he had to check on the quality/price relationship of what he serves. And that matters to him.

As does the supply of decent vegetables, which is why he closes Antichi Sapori for most of July and has a holiday. There's also the small matter of the fierce summer heat, so in August he and the team sometimes cater at a nearby organic *masseria*, Lama di Luna, for dinner service only.

At such times the work routine changes somewhat: the beach in the morning, and then a late start to work in the evening when it's cooling down. Plus of course the wonderful view from the Lama di Luna. "The towns are lit up and the trees look like velvet," Pietro sighs.

Whenever he goes away for a while, the Montegrosso inhabitants are delighted when he and his team returns. As one of them says: "It's very unhappy here when they're away. We really miss them. It's great when everyone's back." And when Pietro returns, so too do his favourite vegetables as nearby farmers bring him their produce: different herbs, mushrooms, *lampascioni*, *chicoriotta*, wild onions. Autumn and winter clearly inspire him. The restaurant too comes into its own as the nights shorten and it turns into a cosy retreat from the colder seasons.

A retreat that, thanks to Pietro's desire to open people's minds to simple food and cooking, even extends to the kitchen. Before the restaurant was redecorated and sized down, there was a sign saying 'It's not forbidden to enter the kitchen' and patrons were encouraged to walk in and start chatting amid the saucepans. When the local health and safety authorities insisted that this be removed, Pietro started making plans to encourage his cooks to serve their dishes and present their work — bringing the kitchen to your table, if you like.

As if such a performance, on top of coping with a constantly full house at both lunch and dinner, were not enough, Pietro is looking forward to other challenges. Feeling that the *territorio* has given him so much he wants to return the favour. He's keen to teach schoolchildren about the joys of the countryside — or, as he puts it: "*Oltre ai cellulari ci sono i pomodori*. Apart from mobiles there are also tomatoes." He's also increasingly asked to welcome groups of disadvantaged youngsters, so that they can get involved in the wonders of growing, and the





rewards of eating your own produce. In October 2007, a group from London arrived for this life-enhancing experience. And he's developing a vegetable garden with two retired people from the village. Diners at the restaurant will be able to pick vegetables and take them to the restaurant to be cooked or enjoy a dish at the restaurant and then go to collect the raw ingredients from the garden on the way home.

Pietro clearly loves the idea of his dishes both telling a story and giving, as he puts it, that emotion to the table, "*è questo il mio futuro: dare queste emozioni al tavolo*". A touch ambitious? Perhaps not from someone who is able to galvanise a kitchen team to work brilliantly every day. And to mobilise an entire village.

Above left: A rustic corner of Antichi Sapori.

Above: Francesco, Pietro's father, is convinced that fresh produce tastes much better, the fewer hands that have touched it.

Acqua e Sale "Water and Salt"

This is an old dish of poor farming communities, using up stale bread by soaking in water and salt, hence the name. Pietro, of course, serves his version with freshly picked vegetables from nearby fields.

SERVES 4

10 cherry tomatoes, halved

1/2 clove garlic, finely chopped

1 small red onion, halved and thinly sliced

1/2 cucumber, peeled, halved lengthwise and thinly sliced

Sea salt and pepper

Parsley, chopped

Oregano

Extra virgin olive oil, a generous amount

1/2 glass water

300g old dry bread, cut into small cubes

In a large bowl, put the tomatoes, garlic, onion, cucumber, salt, pepper, parsley, oregano and abundant oil. Mix well. Separately, sprinkle the water over the bread and then mix the bread with the vegetables, so that it is covered in oil.

As soon as the bread starts to soften, serve. Note that the bread should retain some of its crunch, so don't prepare too long before serving.

Wine suggestion: Rosé — Castel del Monte DOC, Giancarlo Ceci (Bombino Nero)



Pancotto con Rucola Pancotto with Rocket

Pancotto, or “cooked bread”, is usually a type of soup. Pietro drains this version so that it is served with only the liquid that the bread has absorbed. This is made by local cooks with whatever vegetables are available and is popular in winter with cime di rape. The base, however, is always bread, water and oil. Bear in mind that the rocket used here is quite a thick and tough strain; if you only have smaller and thinner leaves available, you will need to adjust the timing, and scarcely blanch them.

SERVES 4

1 head garlic, cloves separated
and peeled
1 chilli
Sea salt
Bay leaf
100cl water

100g rocket leaves, washed
12 cherry tomatoes, quartered
400g hard, stale bread, thickly sliced
and halved
100cl extra virgin olive oil

Put the garlic, chilli, salt and bay leaf in the water, and bring to the boil. Once boiling, add the rocket leaves and, after a couple of minutes or as soon as cooked, add the tomatoes and bread. Keep an eye on this as timing will depend on the type and staleness of the bread being used; take the pan off the heat and remove everything from the water with a slotted spoon when the bread has softened but before it disintegrates.

Discard the bay leaf, chilli and water. Distribute everything else equally between the serving plates and garnish liberally with olive oil to taste.

Wine suggestion: Red — “Parco Marano” Castel del Monte DOC, Giancarlo Ceci (Uva di Troia)

