



## Foligno

Foligno, Umbria's third largest town (after Perugia and Terni), lies between branches of the Via Flaminia and the Topino river and has been a town of trade and industry since Roman times. More unexpectedly perhaps, it is one of the few historic towns not sited on a hilltop.

In 1470, only six years after the first books were printed in Italy, German printers arrived in Foligno with their presses and printed the first Italian book, Dante's *Divina Commedia*. More recently, Foligno was badly bombed in the Second World War, although it remains a busy commercial centre.



Villa Roncalli Marialuisa Scolastra

Villa Roncalli and 13.00 – 15.00 (Sun only)  
viale Roma 25 Closed: Mon  
06034 Foligno Holidays: from 7/8 Jan for  
T: +39 0742 391 091 about ten days and from  
Opening hours: 20.00 – 22.30 8–end Aug. Hotel always open  
Covers: 50. Ten rooms

Slow food. In every sense of the term. The first time I ate at Villa Roncalli, I didn’t receive my first course until well over an hour after ordering – but it wasn’t because of inefficiency. As it was the first time I’d eaten there the chef was anxious for me to get a feel for her type of cooking, so she insisted I try a few taster plates – with accompanying glasses of wine, of course. “Sometimes on the menu there’s something that grabs you and other times it doesn’t inspire to that level,” she explains. “I want people to know what sort of dishes to expect.”

You should definitely eat here – if you have time. Time to sit back, relax and enjoy every mouthful. The food is superb. However, it’s served at a careful, deliberate pace that matches the tranquil, sedate, somewhat other-worldly setting – because everyone is an honoured guest of Villa Roncalli’s fine chef.

The ultra-attentive host in question is Marialuisa Scolastra whose family have run Villa Roncalli for 20 years. Her late mother was chef before her, and her father still diligently tends the garden and makes all the pork products. She may have the calm demeanour of a Vermeer portrait but it belies an intense, passionate woman. And a perfectionist.

For this is not a job that Marialuisa has taken on half-heartedly. She lives and breathes every aspect of Villa Roncalli. Sometimes she can barely sleep for going over the day’s cooking in her head, reliving what she created that day and with what ingredients.

She agrees she has to relax because “if I don’t spend time away from the kitchen I can’t be creative when I’m there”. But it’s a somewhat unconventional form of escape. “*Ho una grande passione per i libri antichi, per le vecchie ricette,*” she says. “I read an awful lot and I love old recipe books. When I retire each

Opposite above: The terrace at Villa Roncalli where diners enjoy superb food served at a careful, deliberate pace.

Opposite below: The aroma of freshly baked bread is one of the many wonderful smells pervading the Villa.







day for a couple of hours, I think about the produce I've bought that morning and how I can transform it. I think about my mother and all the things we did together and inspiration comes to me."

If it wasn't for the heart and passion that goes into her cooking, her approach could almost be described as cerebral gastronomy. She certainly feels strongly about the importance of technique and training in the kitchen. "Knowledge is fundamentally important; I like to know everything," she says.

She is, she adds, lucky that there's such excellent produce in Umbria, although she worries that it's becoming harder and harder for small producers to stay solvent. Nevertheless, in a world where so many people opt for farmed fish, she has wild fish delivered to Villa Roncalli every day – fresh, tasty, healthy food that she enjoys cooking simply with beans and vegetables.

She also loves making pasta, but naturally she has to do it the hard way. "*Io faccio una pasta ancora con il matterello e con molte uova*," she admits. "I still make it with a rolling pin and lots of eggs. It takes a lot of effort and it's tiring but I just love the smell of the dough, of the eggs and flour."

Those aren't the only wonderful smells. Should you stay overnight at the villa, baking aromas of bread, croissants and perhaps cakes will fire up your appetite for breakfast, no matter how much you may have eaten the night before. The jam is a real fruit punch to the taste buds too: Marialuisa spreads out a rich fruit compote on large baking dishes, and sprinkles over broken cinnamon sticks and sugar. Then she pours on some freshly squeezed lemon and orange juice with a generous splash of rum and Sambuca. This is all put into a very low oven for as long as six hours to intensify the taste. The alcohol burns off – but it still leaves a bit of a kick to accompany that morning cappuccino.

You can tell that taste, smell, colour and technique are the building blocks of Marialuisa's cooking – but there is something else. She feels that women have a very different approach from that of men. "We're better with subtle, delicate flavours," she says, adding, not entirely as a joke: "We don't feel the need to throw chilli into everything."

In the garden too she feels that when women nurture seedlings they're less likely to be picked before they're ready. And she should know: she dedicates a considerable amount of time and energy to her garden and picks produce most days for immediate inclusion in her dishes.

Not surprisingly most of her employees are women, foremost among them Agnes, who is Swiss, and who takes care of the admin and generally keeps the place on track in a multilingual, efficient and charming way. But that doesn't mean that Marialuisa sticks to the kitchen and garden. Somehow she finds time to attend to every detail, not just in the dining room but also in the ten bedrooms

Clockwise from top left: Marialuisa dedicates considerable time to the cultivation of produce in the Villa's garden.

There is a tranquil, sedate and somewhat other-worldly feel to Villa Roncalli.

Produce is picked most days for immediate inclusion in the dishes offered.

Marialuisa finds time to deal with every aspect of Villa Roncalli, not just the kitchen and garden.





that are the hotel side of Villa Roncalli. She arranges the beautiful and sizable vases of flowers, ensures that the candles are the right colour and is also very particular about which plates are used for each dish. She even takes responsibility for the wine list because, as she says, “I love wine. *Amo molto il vino, tantissimo.*”

In the winter, most diners are from the surrounding area – Foligno, Spello, Perugia – and at other times from elsewhere in Italy. Only a few foreigners find their way here. In any case, Marialuisa doesn’t try to have a full dining room every night. She likes to be able to keep up with every table and that becomes difficult with too many people. She likes to pop out of the kitchen occasionally to see if her diners are happy, although quite often she doesn’t need to: they pop into the kitchen to thank her.

It’s not surprising. Marialuisa brings huge quantities of care and talent to everything that she touches and unfailingly serves up first-class food full of flavour and artistry. It’s something she was born into, after all. “I remember rolling out pasta with my mother when I was very young. It’s not possible to suddenly become a chef at the age of 40 having been, say, a teacher up until then. It’s cultural.”

So, yes, it’s slow food all right, but it’s more than worth the wait. Marialu-

**Above:** Marialuisa puts her heart and soul into her cooking but feels strongly about the importance of technique and training in the kitchen.

isa takes her food seriously and the result is a remarkably good restaurant. She admits that, if it weren’t economic madness, she would happily forego a charge just to be sure her customers left with a good memory of her. “The cooking is a bit like my mirror image,” she explains. “It’s what I feel, and I think that people who eat here feel a bit of me. *Il momento della tavola è uno dei momenti più belli.* Times spent at the table are the most beautiful moments. My mother and father taught me that.”

**Above:** Fresh produce is delivered to the Villa every day.





### *Passatina di Patate*

## Creamy Potatoes with Clams and Sea Bream

*Marialuisa loves cooking with fish and a delivery of wild (never farmed) fish is made to Villa Roncalli most days. This is a simple dish that's easy to prepare at home.*

#### **SERVES 4**

**3 big potatoes**

**70g butter**

**400ml milk, warmed**

**50g Parmesan**

**nutmeg**

**salt and pepper as needed**

**olive oil**

**250g clams**

**1 sea bream**

**1 clove garlic**

**chopped parsley**

**sprig rosemary**

**1 slice bread**

Boil the potatoes, peel them and mash thoroughly with the butter. Add the warm milk, mix together with a whisk and cook over a gentle heat for about 10 minutes so that the texture of the mash becomes even. Season with the Parmesan, grated nutmeg, salt, pepper and olive oil to taste.

In the meantime cook the clams in a pan. Flash-fry the sea bream with oil, garlic, parsley and rosemary. Shell the clams. Lightly toast the bread.

Put the passatina of potatoes in the centre of a plate together with the shelled clams, the sea bream and the toasted bread.

Garnish with the parsley.

**Wine suggestion: White – Gregante di Caprai**



*Torta al Caffè* Coffee Cake

*“My coffee cake is exquisite. The recipe has been in my family for generations and many, many people have asked me for it, but I’ve never disclosed it before.”*

- SERVES 4
- 100g butter

150g caster sugar

4 eggs

5g vanilla seeds

pinch salt

2 cups cool espresso coffee
- 300g flour

1 glass full fat milk

1 spoon rum

20g baking powder

Soften the butter at room temperature and cream with the sugar until light and fluffy. Mix in the beaten eggs, vanilla, salt, coffee, flour, milk, rum and finally the baking powder. This should result in a creamy mixture.

Cook in the oven at 170°C in dariol moulds or muffin cases. Do not overfill the moulds as these rise quite significantly. Check with a fine skewer after about 25 minutes to see if done.

Serve 2 cakes per person with caramel sauce and cream or custard if desired.

Caramel sauce: 1 glass water and 300g sugar – bring to the boil until it becomes golden, add a glass of fresh cream. Bring back to the boil for a few minutes.

Chantilly cream or confectioner’s custard (flavoured with some rum):  
put around the caramel sauce and sprinkle over some bitter cocoa powder.

Wine suggestion: Dessert – Vin Santo or Moscato di Pantelleria





