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❖ Food

Where food trumps fashion glitz in Milan

BY CHRISTINA BINKLEY

MILAN ITALY'S BUSINESS capital is more prone to transacting than digesting, so it's not surprising that travelers here often end up at one of the high-gloss restaurants frequented by the fashion elite, whose presence helps promote them. These places—including 10 Corso Como and Dolce & Gabbana Gold—should come with a warning label: Fashion people aren't all that into food.

But if you know where to go, Milan is one of Italy's gastronomic gems. Restaurants there often get first pick, ahead of buyers from other cities, of produce, meat and even fish because they are willing to pay top dollar for their privileged clientele. What's more, the cuisine may surprise people who come expecting pasta. Butter is as common a lubricant as olive oil, and a plump yellow risotto is the city's signature dish.

Food in the Lombardy region is heavily influenced by its cousins to the north of the Alps, making Milan a food cosmos where the adventurous are rewarded for stepping off the beaten path. Many restaurants offer a version of the city's primary risotto and breaded beef cutlets and a juicy hunk of buffalo mozzarella, but to experience the region's delicate peasant dishes or its surprisingly sumptuous seafood, you have to ask a local.

I recently visited three restaurants that locals know and love—places where the proprietors themselves are likely to place your food on the table. At Hostaria Borromei, not far from the Duomo cathedral in Milan's ancient center, owner Alberto Besutti escorted my group past a bubbling courtyard fountain to our table and offered a glass of sparkling Prosecco, on the house. "I love it already," my friend exclaimed happily. (Hostaria Borromei, via Borromei, 4; ☎ 39-02-86-453-760.)

Hostaria Borromei, open on the Via Borromei for 45 years, once served only lunch to the neighborhood's bankers and businessmen. The Besuttis bought it in 1994 and turned it into a full-service restaurant serving dinner late into the night, in keeping with locals' custom of rarely heading out to dine before 9 p.m. Borromei received the ultimate recommendation when an acquaintance who knows me as a fashion writer, Marco Franchini, then chief executive of the luxury-goods maker Bally Group, exclaimed upon seeing me there in March. "What are you doing here? I come here because it's safe—no fashion people!"

"If you want to have a nice place, you must be here from the morning until the night," says Mr. Besutti, who runs the restaurant with his wife, Rosa. And perhaps because they practically live there, the hospitality is homey and seductive. At dinner, the tables are set with bowls of crisp semolina crackers in the shape of loose pretzels. A question about olive oil results in the appearance of Mr. Besutti's personal bottle.

Italian menus, if you took them literally, would have you eating four courses or more. Typically, I order an antipasta followed by a main course from sections of the menu called *primi piatti* or sec-



Clockwise from left: Chef Cosimo Santobuono of Al Grissino spoons Barolo wine onto a hunk of braised tuna; exterior of Al Grissino; guests at Trattoria Milanese have fun with a two-man band that tours the local restaurants playing traditional hits.



ond, "firsts" or "seconds," the second being the heavier and more elaborate. For the truly overwhelmed it's often possible to find a turistic menu combining a first and second with dessert for a fixed price.

Italian restaurateurs often covet their own food, offering suggestions and impulsive gifts. But at the Borromei, don't expect Mr. Besutti to choose one of his creations over another. Rather than make a recommendation from his extensive menu, he'd rather explain each dish, and he's perfectly happy to translate the Italian

menu into English—as he did with the entire list of "secondi piatti" meats and fish. (I chose the osso buco and had to restrain myself from licking the bowl.) When our table requested a side dish of spinach, the restaurant was out; Mr. Besutti suggested broccoli, which arrived succulent in garlic and olive oil. And he recommended a wine: Our 2006 Barbera was a bargain at \$25—and delicious. For dessert, vanilla ice cream arrived unrequested and drowned in rum at the table.

Another gem is Trattoria Milanese, which sits on a narrow,

stone-cobbled street near the Duomo called via Santa Marta. Don't confuse this cozy, crowded restaurant with others using the same name elsewhere in the city; they are unrelated. Trattoria specialties are the region's famous risotto and a meaty osso buco that will grow hair on your chest; for those who just can't decide, the restaurant serves a dish with a half-serving of each. The delicious tripe dish here is *foiolo*—a word from a local dialect that refers to "the best part of the tripe," says Giuseppe Villa, who owns Trattoria Milanese with his wife, Antonella, and whose family has run it since 1933. Many of the recipes come from Mr. Villa's grandfather, also named Giuseppe Villa. (Trattoria Milanese, via Santa Marta, 11; ☎ 39-02-86-451-991.)

Given the charms of the neighborhood, one of Milan's oldest, it's worth strolling to the restaurant in Milanese after dark; the street in either direction is dark and quiet, and when you reach the Trattoria, the interior lights shine out on the narrow street in welcome. A word to the wise: Make dinner reservations and show up on time—a courtesy that's expected at most of the city's restaurants. An acquaintance of mine was asked to leave Trattoria Milanese when her dinner partners arrived seriously

late.

You would be forgiven for neglecting fish in land-locked Milan, but a walk past the antipasti table at Ristorante Al Grissino will convince you that what locals say is true—Milan has fabulous fresh seafood. Warm octopus with asparagus and squid with *fagioli* (beans) aren't Milanese specialties—proprietor-brothers Mauro and Pasquale Caggianelli have created a menu that covers the Mediterranean—but the dishes have helped cement the restaurant's reputation among Milan's cognoscenti. It came recommended to me by Federico Marchetti, chief executive of Yoox.com, who lives in Milan. (Ristorante Al Grissino, via GB Tiepolo, 54; ☎ 39-02-86-730-392.)

A note on antipasti tables, at Al Grissino and elsewhere. They are always placed tantalizingly by the door, requiring patrons to walk the plank past a mouth-watering assortment of specialties, laid out home-style on plates and bowls. It's the most effective ploy to whet the appetite that I have ever encountered.

The first surprise at Al Grissino came with the hook provided to hang my purse from the table edge. Then, as at the Hostaria Borromei, our meal began with a gift—delicious grilled baby shrimp, lightly salted. The fresh tuna braised in Barolo wine sounded so off-kilter that I ordered it just to see. It arrived deep red, from the red wine, and blessedly juicy, served over braised potatoes.

The waiters at Al Grissino are happy to advise. In fact, ours declined to take my order for *insalata ricola* (arugula salad). "No! Potato!" he said, wagging his finger, offering what I took as a warning that the potatoes and salad didn't mix. Later, I consulted Italian food specialist Giuliano Haran, who said there's no such proscription. "Waiters in Italy do get very protective of their restaurants and their cuisine," he said. "It sounds like a miscommunication." No matter. Instead, I chose a "prima" of bronzo carpaccio, thin slices of raw fish served with sliced artichoke hearts. He seemed pleased and so was I.



Above left, Hostaria Borromei owner Alberto Besutti speaks with guests; above right, a dish of panna cotta as served at Hostaria Borromei.

