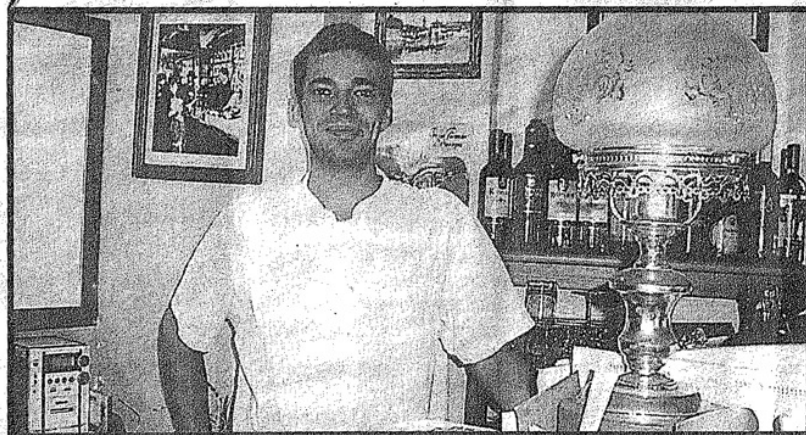


Restaurant Review

By Andrew Valente

A real Italian eaterie comes to town



■ COOK Edoardo Burrioni of the trattoria San Ambros.

WEEKLY FEATURE

THERE are hundreds of Italian eateries on the island, but very few real Italian ristoranti, and it's even harder to find genuine trattorias. A trattoria is a small family-run eaterie with a short menu that serves good home cooking at reasonable prices.

In many ways, the trattoria is the equivalent of the bistro although, unlike the bistro, a bar is not an essential. One thing that ristoranti and trattorias have in common is that neither serves the omnipresent pizza.

Today's restaurant is called San Ambros, named after the 4th century Bishop of Milan who introduced the Ambrosian chant, a type of plain-song that predated the Gregorian chant.

San Ambros fulfils the definition of a real trattoria: it is small, it serves imaginative home cooking and it is good value for money, most important in these days of ever-rising prices.

There is no printed menu, the dishes being displayed on two blackboards. We ate outside in the square and it was absolutely divine. Every façade except one has been renovated and repainted and I have never

● THE VERDICT

This is one of the most genuine Italian eateries I have come across in Majorca. The whole set-up is authentic and the food is imaginative and well cooked. It's quite unlike the vast majority of other Italian restaurants you have eaten in. Eating outside in the square is delightful in the summer and the interior will be snug and cosy for winter dining.

● THE PLACE

Trattoria San Ambros, Plaza Salvador Coll 11, Palma (at the start of Calle Sindicato). Tel: 971-725226. Open for lunch and dinner but closed on Sundays. There are few tables, so it's always best to book for dinner.

seen the Plaza Coll look so attractive and spruce.

The menu is short, mainly because the kitchen is tiny, with space for only one cook. But the choices are interesting and for once here is an Italian menu without a single scallopine, an Italian classic but nowadays so ubiquitous it has become a risible cliché.

We shared three dishes, starting with an extremely tasty coquilles Saint Jacques, the white scallop meat cut up and cooked with a scrummy and meltingly soft mixture of tomatoes, onions and aubergines and served on the giant shell. There was

a little salad on the side that was delectably and subtly dressed. They serve two shells per portion, making this good value for money and ideal for sharing between two.

The word tortino was a bit of a puzzle until the charming Italian waitress explained that it is a terrine. In this case it contained octopus, diced potatoes, tomatoes and Majorcan pansides olives. This was another dish that was absolutely overflowing with flavour.

It's a very Mediterranean concoction that was put together in a round mould, so breaking into it to find the little morsels of food was fun. Unfortunately,

● THE BILL

We shared three dishes:

- Coquilles St Jacques on the shell with a savoury veggie mixture, 12 euros
 - Terrine of octopus, potatoes, tomatoes and black olives, 13 euros
 - Risotto with chicken, pumpkin, pinenuts and thyme, 12 euros
 - 4 draught beers, 10 euros
- There was a charge of 1.50 euros per person for olives, bread and grissini
Total cost with VAT: 48 euros.

there were two basic mistakes: the potatoes were undercooked and the octopus was overcooked. That meant that the potatoes were on the hard side and the octopus wasn't as tender as it should have been. We told the waitress about the potatoes and we saw her go straight to the kitchen latch where she told the cook: "The potatoes were underdone." When the potatoes are tender and the octopus slices are butter-soft, this will be a superb dish.

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BEFORE ordering a risotto in a restaurant, even an Italian one, I always ask the waiter a very important question: "What kind of rice goes into the risotto?" If the answer isn't one of the three Italian varieties that make the best risotto, then I order another dish.

At San Ambros the answer was carnaroli, which is one of the big three and is considered by some experts to be the best of the risotto rices. The reason these three varieties are so suitable for risotto is that they can absorb more liquid than other rices without bursting. The more stock and butter these rices soak up, the tastier they become.

There is another reason why the big three make excellent risottos: they contain a layer of starch that dissolves during the cooking, thus producing a thick silky liquid that gives risotto its characteristic consistency.

So with San Ambros using carnaroli rice for the risotto we were off to a good start. What I didn't know at the time was that the cook is from Milan, where risotto is one of the great specialities. The cook is Edoardo Burrioni who

went to Milan's school of hostelry and who made his first risotto at the tender age of 11. So he knows a thing or two about risotto.

And his consummate knowledge showed in the risotto he served us. Like all fine risottos, it was simple enough, being made with chicken, pumpkin, pinenuts and thyme. One of the beauties of this risotto was that Edoardo was mean with the pumpkin and extravagant with the pinenuts.

Pumpkin is a treacherous ingredient because, like the carrot, it is extremely sweet. If we use too much of it, then

it's as if we had added sugar to the dish, and no amount of salt will correct that fault. So its presence in a dish like risotto should be minimal.

Pinenuts are always delightful but they are also expensive, so most cooks are inclined to use them in miserly amounts. But not Edoardo. Every forkful of risotto I took contained at least one pinenut and sometimes two or three. This helped to make the risotto truly excellent.

But there was more to it than that. The taste of every ingredient was very much to the fore: the chicken tasted of chicken, the sweetness of the pumpkin was only discernible when biting into a small piece, and the flavour of the pinenuts was everywhere, but always subtle and unobtrusive.

And then there was the thyme. It was sprinkled over the top of the risotto, so it could be picked out when wanted, thus providing yet another layer of delicious flavour. And finally there was the carnaroli. It was perfectly cooked, making it worthy of a cook trained in Milan and who made his first risotto at the age of 11.

SUPERB RISOTTO