

Lifestyle & Culture



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Cena Conviviale at Michael's

The Accademia Italiana della Cucina held another very special dinner last month, this time at Michael's in Archbishop Street, Valletta. Michael Cauchi has a long and distinguished history of providing good food not only to individuals but also on film sets and goes back to his Re del Pesce restaurant days. But time passes and monuments need restoration. Although traditional recipes and basic methods of cookery remain the same cookery itself has moved on and Michael, now with his son Daniel, another dedicated chef, is not one to be left behind. He has always been an innovator. First of all the pace of life has profoundly altered our eating habits even if good food undoubtedly remains a major pleasure, indeed, a source of entertainment. Most of us know more about it than previous generations but the time and the means devoted to its preparation no longer enjoy former scope and abundance, and nutritional concerns have had their influence on taste. Housewives who spend hours in the kitchen preparing food for the family are becoming few and far between as more and more women go out to work and have far less time to spare fiddling with complicated or new dishes.

Cooking is very much a child of its time. It constantly adapts itself to new requirements, to the tastes and desires of society. Its ties with civilization have always been very close. The choice of equipment, the changes in eating habits and the ingredients available would certainly surprise someone like Madame de Sévigné who noted, at Versailles, 'the passion for new garden peas', if she were confronted with a salad of soya bean sprouts or a couscous, let alone a hamburger. Imagine the astonishment of Grimod de la Reynière, the first public critic of cooking, well known for his sensual and public gastronomic lifestyle and who witnessed the opening of the first restaurants and reviewed them, yes, imagine him at a fast-food counter or a microwave oven.

Thankfully, for the sake of our health if nothing else, days spent at the dining table (often finishing up under it because of excessive drinking) and ten-course menus have disappeared but for many of us, eating out at a good restaurant, food which has been prepared with attention by someone else, is still a treat.

Now, that evening at Michael's followed three interesting talks on food at the Isti-



Mrs Sue Mifsud and Mrs Matty Cremona



A toast to the chef and his kitchen brigade



Sig. Marcio Vargas reading Kipling's *If* in an Italian translation



Mr Sammy Cremona, Ms Jeanne Borg and Sig. Mauro Tomaselli



Mrs Mariella Zarb and your diarist



Michael Cauchi talks about the menu



Dott. Salvatore Schirmo, Siga. Tomaselli, Chef Michael Cauchi and Mr Joe Mizzi

tuto Italiano di Cultura, so we came to the table armed with plenty of information and details. Moreover, food writer, Matty Cremona supplied us with handy and well-researched Culinary Notes on our side plates.

So what did Michael and Daniel prepare for us to enjoy that evening which turned out to be truly convivial? For a start we drank Meridiana's Astarte Melqart throughout the evening, which is a good start.

The antipasto was ricotta with a pistachio pesto, drizzled with Maltese honey and olive oil and garnished with micro greens and orange marmalade, a great way of using our local ricotta and it was beautifully presented. The next dish was lasagne, but forget ragù, white sauce and cheese or white sauce and spinach, usual fare. Michael used fresh artichokes and burrata, that delicious combination of mozzarella and cream. In her notes Matty Cremona told us that ricotta was first recorded by

Homer when Odysseus spied Polyphemus sitting among his sheep eating ricotta from a straw basket in Sicily. Among other interesting facts she also said that Maltese ricotta uses sea water as a curdling agent, just as they still do on Pantelleria. As to artichokes, it is another ancient food and here Matty quoted that early French chronicler Jean Quentin D'Autun who in 1536 recorded that there were two sorts of this - the Maltese ate; a sour sort as well as the ones the Italians now eat 'with so much relish'

and which were found to be growing in Malta with great abundance. I really must try to make this dish at home although I cannot see me having the patience to scrape the artichoke leaves to make the sauce. The artichoke paste that comes in jars are simply not right for this recipe.

Main course was pork cheeks which in Michael's words were 'slow cooked for six hours at low temperature' and served with a purée of sage. This pig must have been very special. I have had pork cheeks before but I have to admit they were not great but Michael's were delicious. Perhaps it was an especially fat pig. Matty's notes on pork were extensive and very interesting. I will only quote her quote from Louis De Boisgelin in his *Ancient and Modern Malta* (1804): "The Maltese are remarkably sober; a clove of garlic, or an onion, anchovies dipped in oil, and salt-fish, being their usual diet. On great festivals, they eat pork. Hogs are very common in towns and villages; many of these animals belong to the church and different convents, and walk about the street both night and day, where they pick up sufficient nourishment. They are seldom molested, and never stolen." I am sure we are all thankful that pigs no longer roam our streets and goats no longer come to be milked at the gate of our homes.

Since the dinner took place around the feast of St Joseph it was zeppoli for dessert. Matty gave us extensive notes about their interesting history. They were served with a parmesan ice-cream, yes, that's right. It had a very subtle taste too and the cheese certainly did not take over. As if the food wasn't enough the company was excellent too and Mariano read out a poem: Kipling's *If* but in Italian. What else could one ask for in one evening?

This was indeed a culinary 'experience' and another memorable meal. My attitude towards food varies from hedonistic relish through bouts of conscience which whisper that I should be more careful and weight-watch which translates into periods of puritanical disapproval and the turning down of invitations. I was going to start the 'nibbling of lettuce' phase but yet another couple of invitations have just arrived and I really cannot withdraw with honour. My lettuce phase is going to have to wait yet again.

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