



CHOW, BELLA!

Put down that cell phone (just for a second) and take a bite out of this tasty fashion mecca. BY LEIGH NEWMAN

Here's what I'd like to know about Milan: How does everyone manage to fit into their leather pants, especially women wearing this season's shiny gold belts that further accentuate their neck-sized waists? With all the city's designer wardrobes, designer furniture, even designer televisions (now sold at Emporium Armani), you'd think the food would follow suit—coolly spare, Prada-ishly minimal, and lower in calories than a bottle of San Pellegrino. The Milanese may revere style in every other aspect of

FOOTING THE BILL: 1. Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II is the way a mall was meant to look. 2, 3. When at Matarel, if you've overdosed on osso buco, try the tortelloni. 4. Along hipper-than-thou Via Fiori Chiari in the Brera district.



their lives, but when it comes to mealtime, “grandma-old-fashioned” is the only brand in town. I'm talking comfort food, hearty as a steaming bowl of risotto, heavy as gravy-covered mounds of mashed polenta. And truthfully, it's a relief.

Sometimes Milan's obsession with personal style seems like a cover-up for its inferiority complex: Namely that the city is merely a business stopover. Aside from the glass-covered shopping arcade of the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II; the Brera quarter's chicer-than-Paris Baroque streets; and the trendy, canalside neighborhood of Navigli, the city's architecture resembles a modernist experiment in soot (the legacy of Milan's industrial success). And, oth-

MILAN



The Duomo: Galleria's next-door neighbor.

er than the handfuls of tourists here to see “The Last Supper” and buy a pair of stiletto heels, visitors don’t linger in town. But sit down at a table, and you’ll find another city.

Like many places made rich by turn-of-the-20th-century industry, a small-town element still lurks in the streets. Milan’s transformation from working-class city to national economic powerhouse was relatively recent—no more than 30 years ago. You won’t find a great number of eating options other than Milanese; Tuscan and Continental substitute for ethnic and avant-garde. And the whole point in Milan is to truly eat, not dine. Portions are uncommonly large, and butter is used almost as frequently as olive oil. As for meat, there’s traditional osso buco on the bone (with fatty marrow waiting to be scooped out), breaded veal cutlets, and plenty of pork. This is a cuisine designed to undo a day’s work in the factory—or an afternoon of intensive shopping. Inside these three spots you can fill up on the real Milan.

YOU HUNGRY YET?

To indulge in traditional Milanese food, begin at an osteria or trattoria. An osteria is considered a step above a trattoria in terms of food and service, but—as in the rest of Italy—this distinction exists in name only. Most of the restaurants found near the marble-dripped Duomo aren’t worth the time or inflated prices. Instead, walk through the Brera quarter. On the northern edge, you’ll find Matalè. Outside, this trattoria doesn’t look like much—just lace-curtained windows and a sign.

Inside, it’s charmingly cramped and strictly down-home—which is precisely why you’ve come. The burnt-red ceiling is crossed with oak beams; a few copper pots hang on the walls; and the tables are so cozy, you have to inhale deeply to reach your seat. Though the menu’s in Italian (a good sign, despite the three or so tables of foreigners among 30 occupied by locals), waiters act grandmotherly and explain everything with hand gestures. Even if you tend to shy away from adventuresome dishes, order a *gnervilli* appetizer. Okay, it’s calf tendon, but tossed with vinegar, olive oil, and red onions, it tastes like a cold, tangy, mild-meat salad. Next up is *risotto alla Milanese*, the city’s staple dish. Main courses are good, not astounding (you’re really here for a dose of unadulterated Milan), but you can choose another local and house specialty, the *cazzooula*, a simple pork stew. Meat turns out very-well-done on the bone, with slices of crackled skin. Polenta (a bit lumpy, in this case), dark green cabbage, and veal sausages—a reminder of Milan’s past occupation by the Austrians—round out the heaping plate. To lighten things up, wash down your meal with some *croatina*, a bubbling red wine that’s served by the bottle (you’re only charged by how much you drink). “Five minutes to digest!” your waiter warns, just like a *nonna*. After a pine-nut tart and a coffee, it’s time to squeeze through the tightly packed tables and slip into a midafternoon siesta (dinner for two, before wine, tax, and tip, \$50; Corso Garibaldi 75; 011-39-02-65-42-04).

BASTA, BASTA!

Like most ristorante, Alfredo Gran San Bernardo has a more refined atmosphere than a trattoria. But it’s not overly fancy. The decor at San Bernardo is simple—cream-colored walls, parquet floors, marble counters, and just 15 tables. Some menus have English translations penned-in, but this is the place to eat typical (as in typical of the area—not as in or-

dinary) Milanese food. You'll see a few Japanese tourists, but mostly the patrons boil down to 50-something, well-heeled Italian couples, feeding each other across tables, speaking in hushed voices, and occasionally whispering into their cell phones. But if the atmosphere is somewhat affected, the food isn't. To begin with, the chef treats you to a small plate of veal fritters—breaded, moist, and spicy. Not only does San Bernardo serve the standard version of *risotto alla Milanese*, but another local variation called *risotto alla Milanese al salto*, in which the risotto is panfried and slid onto a plate like a frittata. If the word “fried” troubles you, know that the *risotto salto* isn't greasy, just plain rich. An excellent portion of



San Bernardo's specialty? Fashion plates.

osso buco wholly depends on the quality of the veal. Here the meat has only enough fat for flavor and arrives tender, pinkish, and swimming in a thin gravy—with a huge tower of polenta, of course, to soak up the juices. At the evening's end, most every table orders the soufflé. And if it seems to be a little lonely, have the waiter top it with a spoonful (or five) of uber-dark melted chocolate (dinner for two, before wine, tax, and tip, \$90; Via GA Borghese 14; 011-39-02-331-90-00).

THE LAST SUPPER

The best part about De Berte is that almost no one knows about it. That's because it's far north of the lovely parts of town, near the central train station. (It's best to take a cab.) Nevertheless, even set among drab '60s buildings, De Berte manages to resemble a pastoral retreat—

very romantic, especially for dinner. Behind ivy-covered brick walls and a curlicued iron gate, the place spreads out over three rooms. The first thing you see is a massive sideboard covered with platters of antipasti—stuffed tomatoes, grilled eggplant and zucchini, marinated sardines, codfish fritters. The ceilings are wood-beamed, the walls paneled, the fireplace welcoming. Kelly green linens adorn the tables, and there are fresh flowers everywhere. Though the decor definitely says ristorante, the food here is simpler than its surroundings. And while the menu has classic choices from start to finish, compared with Matarè or San Bernardo, most dishes lack that distinct homemade gusto. Neither you nor the mid-level-manager-looking patrons should expect a perfect meal, but it'll be worth the cab fare. Either serve yourself from the antipasti table or order a bowl of minestrone. The flavors are fresh and sharp; you can taste the parsley and the slight saltiness of the broth, but there's nothing extra to drown out any of the ingredients. De Berte serves just about every kind of traditional entree, from osso buco to *rognone* (kidneys with garlic) to *cotoletta alla Milanese*—a very lightly breaded veal cutlet that's fried in butter to seal in the juices. Unfortunately, the liquid escaped my version. And while it may be difficult to skip the tiramisu for dessert, give the *menighina* a try. (It's a local favorite.) Topped with powdered sugar and sandwiched between three layers of custard, this light yellow cake seems to pine for a splash of Grand Marnier, which, happily, the waiter provides with a dramatic flourish of arms and smiles that appears to have been practiced in a mirror—like so many things in Milan. So love it or hate it; then just eat it up (dinner for two, before wine, tax, and tip, \$60; Via Algarotti, 20; 011-39-02-66-94-627). **TH**

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