



 THE ORIGINS

UNDER THE TUSCAN SUN

In the Renaissance city of Florence, a modern food movement away from traditional Tuscan fare is being interpreted by two very different chefs. Writer **LAURA MILLAR** travels to Florence to investigate

IT'S BARELY SEVEN in the evening when an inky dusk begins to bloom over the historic streets of Florence. As my taxi turns onto the narrow alleyway of Via Delle Seggiole, a ten-minute walk from Ponte Vecchio, it has to inch carefully to avoid the large queue that has already started to form across the road from my destination. This is Locale, a bar and restaurant that opened in 2015 and that, over the past couple of years, has evolved to become one of the city's hottest tickets. Its success largely comes down to two things: firstly, the appointment of head chef Simone Caponnetto in September 2021, and secondly, its entry onto the World's 50 Best Bars list a year later, gliding in at a respectable number 39.

I've come to Florence to experience what some are touting as a fine-dining food revolution, one enhanced by Caponnetto, and another chef, Alessandro Cozzolino, both just 33. Tuscany is famous for its cucina povera, which evolved out of scarcity and necessity, using every last leftover, vegetable, and part of an animal to create simple, but nourishing, meals - such as panzanella and pappa al pomodoro, both of which make use of stale bread, and Florence's famous *lampradotto*, the lining of a cow's stomach (or tripe) often found at market stalls throughout the city, stewed in herbs and served up, dripping gravy, in a chewy panini. Tourist restaurants have long fallen back on staple dishes like bistecca alla Fiorentina or pappardelle with wild boar ragu, which, although tasty, perhaps lack imagination. The past few years, and the creativity of these two chefs in particular, have proved there can be much more to Tuscan cuisine.

Locale is housed in Palazzo Concini, a handsome 13th century mansion which at one point was owned by a member of the notoriously powerful Medici family (think the medieval equivalent of *Succession's* Roy clan, but in banking rather than media). In the basement is a Roman wine cellar which predates the rest of the house, along with



ROOM TO BREATHE: The stunning opulence of the interiors at Locale Firenze



CASE STUDY:
Petit fours served
in a gilt glass case
at chef Simone
Caponnetto's
restaurant
Locale Firenze

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↳ the former servants' quarters. There's also a room which functions as a laboratory, scattered with bulbous glass flasks, beakers and test tubes, where both Caponnetto

and the bar manager, Fabio Fanni, come to play Willy Wonka, experimenting with innovative flavours and techniques.

During my visit - perhaps aptly as the drink was conceived in Florence - it's Negroni Week; Fanni is away showing off his mixology skills in Bangkok, so it's left to Locale's affable GM, Faramarz Poosty, to talk me through the concept behind the cocktails which helped propel it onto the 50 Best list. The buzzy, vibey bar itself is housed in what used to be the Palazzo's courtyard entrance, with a retractable glass roof and sturdy shelves of uplit, colour-themed glass bottles set under Renaissance stone arches. "Our ideas are often influenced by the seasons," explains Poosty. "Currently we're using a lot of

vegetables, from which we make distillates, such as tomato, olive, or fennel. We also fat-wash spirits with ingredients like black miso, as well as butter." It makes for highly creative, and delicious, cocktails. One I try, the Centriolo, is a neat take on a spicy margarita, with tequila, acidified cucumber and habanero, while another, Pomodoro, blends barley spirit with tomato water. "Simone and Fabio collaborate and consult each other often," adds Poosty; "they share ingredients and, sometimes, leftovers."

Dinner takes place in one of three sumptuous rooms on the ground floor, all high ceilings, colonnades, velvet drapes and black and white tiling. Some walls are hung with what looks like era-appropriate art - delicate charcoal nudes or gilt-framed portraits of aristocrats - contrasted with vast canvases by French contemporary artist Murrain Billi. The entire setting is theatrical, with tables spotlit from above. And then there's the food. Even before I meet Caponnetto, I like his style; he's named his two tasting menus Salvation (€120), and the slightly longer Sin (€150; wine pairing extra in both cases). What's the difference? The sommelier, Stefano, explains: 'Salvation is a little less intense in terms of flavour and preparation; Sin is more extreme.' It's a blind tasting - guests don't see the menus beforehand - but I sign up for sinning. What follows over the next three hours is a parade of beautifully presented, fascinating dishes. It warms up with amuse-bouches such as the crunchy, slightly bitter petals of a dahlia steeped in an aromatic broth; a plump, juicy, barbecued mussel topped with oozy caciocavallo cheese; a small loaf of unsalted bread - Tuscan style - with chicken skin butter; and an extraordinary creation which looks like a small dollop of burrata but is in fact vegan, made with pine nut milk, and as creamy as the cheese it resembles.

The small but precise main courses include a colourful dish made with twelve varieties of tomatoes, drizzled with basil oil infused with a parmesan reduction; raw courgette served with caramelised koji cream, yoghurt and nettle; and a red onion stuffed with a caviar, hibiscus and pistachio pesto. My absolute favourite is a comforting bowl of orzo pasta shot through with squid ink and confit tomatoes, and laced with seared squid liver; my least favourite a koji nigiri flavoured with cedar cream and topped with raw beef and eel. The texture - a Caponnetto signature, I discover - is like

damp cotton wool, the cedar cream a too-perfumed, jarring note. But as a whole, it's spectacular. And when I meet Caponnetto afterwards, it all makes sense.

A fizzing ball of energy, his smart chef's whites contrasting with his hipster moustache and man-bun, he explains that he left Florence aged 19, curious to explore the world and its food. 'I wasn't sure then that I actually wanted to be a chef,' he admits, 'but in Sydney I met a pastry chef who had worked at the Waterside Inn [in

Bray] with Michel Roux, so I moved to the UK to work there for 18 months.' He has also worked with Angela Hartnett, and with Heinz Beck at La Pergola in Rome, but his most influential mentor has been Andoni Luis Aduriz, of renowned Mugaritz in Erretera, Spain. 'My time there as a stagiaire was the best experience,' he enthuses. 'The restaurant shuts for four months a year and then you have to be creative and come up with ideas. They give you a single ingredient and tell you to ↘

The imposing, honey-coloured stone facade sits amid pretty landscaped gardens



DINE OUT ON THIS: [clockwise from top left] Koji, eel, aged beef; Chef Simone Caponnetto; asparagus, watercress, mint; caramelised bread; courgette, nettle

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invent a whole dish around it; it's incredibly intense.' Mugaritz was where Caponnetto developed his love for contrasting textures and experimenting with un-Italian techniques such as fermentation. His fondness for koji-fermented rice - comes from time spent working in Tokyo. 'My cooking takes Florence, and Italy, as a base and then goes beyond. All our ingredients come from here; we have a garden nearby where we grow many of our own vegetables. The building is impressive, and the menu has to live up to it. I'm still discovering myself though,' he grins impishly. 'Sometimes when I create a dish I'm like a child, full of impulsiveness.'

If Caponnetto is more rock and roll, in both his appearance and his approach, then up in the rolling hills just outside the city, near the charming village of Fiesole, another chef, Alessandro Cozzolino, evokes a wholesome, 1960s matinee idol, with his black, Elvis quiff and wide, gap-toothed grin. The same age as Caponnetto, 33, he

too has recently risen to an elevated status, taking over as executive chef at Villa San Michele, a Belmond Hotel, Florence, in 2019. A former monastery dating from the 15th century, its imposing, honey-coloured stone facade sits amid pretty landscaped gardens. One side of the building is clad in 150-year old wisteria, there's a swimming pool on the top terrace, and the hill rising behind it, Monte Ceceri, is the location where Leonardo da Vinci tested his first ever flying machine (spoiler alert: it succumbed instantly to the laws of gravity).

After the Franciscan friars had to leave under the orders of Napoleon - who briefly took up residence here himself - it became a private home, then a hotel. The interiors blend antiques from the building's past with contemporary furniture, and, thanks to Belmond's recent art collaboration with international gallery Continua, you'll find contrasts such as a genuine 17th century fresco of the Last Supper, under which sits a layered glass installation by Argentinian artist Leandro Erlich. However, the main draw of Villa San Michele is what finally convinced Cozzolino to leave his previous job at the Grand Hyatt in Hong Kong and come and oversee the hotel's three restaurants: the view.

From its elevated position, you can see across the whole of Florence and the Arno valley, something Cozzolino never gets bored of. "I can see the Duomo, the river... it helps inspire me." Even though he's from the southern town of Caserta, he is passionate about Tuscan produce. "Here, we're just 40km from the sea, so we have ingredients from the coast and the land," he



SILVER SPOON: [above] Chef Alessandro Cozzolino [below] a terrine of cow nerves, land snails, pomegranate and pickled vegetables

explains as we chat in the small, lush herb and vegetable garden he's created. "We serve three tasting menus here and one of them purely features seafood. It's perhaps not what people associate with this part of Italy." Regardless, Cozzolino's food is clearly highly appealing to his well-heeled diners, the majority of whom are not hotel guests, and who have included the Kardashians, Kanye West, and actress Monica Bellucci.

La Loggia is the fine-dining offering, and its tasting menus (which range from €140 to €190, wine pairings extra) showcase his love for the land around him. At dinner on La Loggia's open-air terrace that evening, one flavourful course evokes a meal his mother used to make him: a red pepper risotto, studded with pork and served in the capiscum it was made from. He used to eat the filling and leave the rest; nostalgia is part of what drives him. I also love the earthy, beetroot-based gnudi which come with radicchio and blue cheese, and tender pigeon cooked with spiced cauliflower and vermouth. It's wholesome but clearly made with passion - I can understand what he means when he told me earlier, "my only words are cooking; I communicate via the dish." Both he and Simone Caponnetto, then, have something different and unique to say about Tuscan cuisine; they have helped to kick-start a new dialogue, and increasingly, people are listening. belmond.com; locafirenze.it

