

A taste of things to come

Traditional cooking still reigns supreme in Rome, but new restaurants in the ancient city are breaking the mould. We spoke to their chefs to find out how they mix things up while staying true to their roots

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As the capital of the country that founded the Slow Food moment, it's not exactly surprising that Rome has never been one for fast-moving culinary fads. Instead, it's known for gutsy soul food, with chefs using every piece of an animal – a relic from the days when slaughterhouse workers were paid with tail, intestines and brain to supplement their wages. Consequently, Roman chefs have always made the most of what other food cultures see as cheap offcuts: braised oxtail, carbonara made with *guanciale* (pig's cheek) and *trippa alla Romana* (tripe in a tomato sauce) are unmissable classics.

However, there is change in the air. Even in a city as classical as Rome, new restaurants are opening up that offer alternatives to the belt-busting cuisine of old, along with new ways to socialise. But how, and why, are they doing this?

"Diners want something recognisable on their plate, but they're also curious and willing to try something new," says chef Sarah Cicolini, the lead driving force behind SantoPalato ([fb.com/santopalatoroma](https://www.facebook.com/santopalatoroma)), a "trattoria moderna" in San Giovanni, south-east of the city centre, which opened two years ago.

While the restaurant may look like your average, albeit more stylish, neighbourhood trattoria, and offer a traditionally warm welcome, there is nothing average or traditional about the food. Sarah's boundary-pushing cooking, part of a Roman new wave, creates innovative new dishes such as tartare of duck breast with glossy streaks of Jerusalem artichoke and roasted beetroot sauce.

Such innovation might be expected in any other capital city, but Italian chefs mess with local tastes at their peril, as one of the world's most renowned and awarded avant-garde chefs, Massimo Bottura, discovered. When he first started reimagining classic Italian dishes he faced outrage from his compatriots, who saw meddling with tradition as sacrilege. It took years of persistence for Massimo's new style of cuisine to be accepted and recognised – his experimental dishes have since won his restaurant, Osteria Francescana in Modena, three Michelin stars and two World's Best Restaurant awards. Even so, he had to capitulate to the more conservative Italian diners and still offers a choice of some more traditional, crowd-pleasing dishes.

In Rome, Sarah's pragmatic solution to such resistance is to cook dishes that are creative yet familiar, ones that customers will come back for time and again. So her *polpette* (meatballs) may appear traditional, but the intriguing accompanying white celery and peanut sauce is anything but. Likewise, oxtail and tongue are Roman classics, but Sarah serves them as a thinly sliced terrine, topped with romanesco broccoli and radish pickled to a delicate pink (pictured right). →

SARAH CICOLINI (BELOW) is encouraging diners to embrace new flavours by combining them with Roman classics (right)

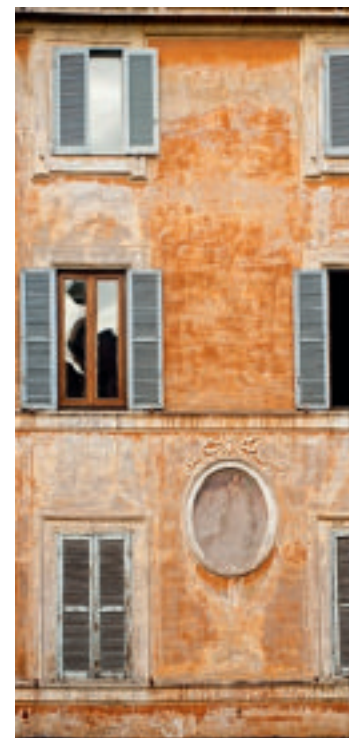




“Diners want something recognisable, but they’re also curious and willing to try something new”



CHEFS LEOPOLDO FRIGERIO
and Mauro Poddesu
(left) opened Pasta
Chef to bring gourmet
flavours to Rome's
casual dining scene



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“We’re a young team, and I think that makes us different,” Sarah says. Though just 30, she’s worked at a number of hotels and restaurants in her home region of Abruzzo, east of Rome, as well as in the capital itself, including Michelin-starred *Metamorfosi*. She’s also made a TV series called *La scelta di Sarah* (Sarah’s Choice), which covered, among other things, her decision to give up a medical career for the kitchen.

“The best thing for a cook is to be able to give people wonderful things,” Sarah says. “We work closely with producers directly in the region of Lazio and the province of Viterbo for cheese and meat. We always buy from farms that feed the animals with homegrown, organic produce, so nothing comes from outside. It’s a closed circle

process known as *circolo biologico*, and the results are exceptional,” she explains.

“Fresh produce, that’s the secret of Italian food,” agrees Leopoldo Frigerio, executive chef at Pasta Chef (pastachef.com), a three-year-old venture from Leopoldo and fellow chef Mauro Poddesu, which brings gourmet fast food at affordable prices to central Rome. They have two branches, one in the Sant’Angelo neighbourhood, another in Monti, with a set menu of pasta dishes and big salads, where the vegetables change according to the season, plus a blackboard of specials. The specials allow them to “play”, as Leopoldo describes it, making more complex, creative dishes. Alongside classic Roman pasta recipes such as *amatriciana* and *cacio e pepe*, a special pork dish, slow-cooked for five hours in Marsala wine, is lapped up enthusiastically by the lunchtime crowd of hungry office workers, students and groups of friends chatting away as they pay at the till and eat at counters.

Leopoldo and Mauro met while working together at a restaurant near the Trevi Fountain. The former became a chef after “peeling potatoes for pocket money” while studying chemistry and environmental science at university, and the latter worked kitchens in South America, the Middle East, the US and Europe. →



Two things stand out about Pasta Chef – the first is the quality of the dishes in a no-frills environment. “We give people really high quality fast food at a reasonable price. And we do it on a daily basis. We’re the first in Italy for sure. There’s no one else doing this,” Leopoldo says. The second is its focus on sustainability. “There’s no waiter, no good view, there are no fancy glasses – but these cups and the cutlery are compostable and everything else is recyclable, because these days being environmentally friendly is a must.”

The communal experience of eating with other people at lunchtime – rather than a hurried sandwich at a desk – is something they’re proud to offer. “We’ve had people say ‘You’ve given dignity back to my lunchbreak,’” Leopoldo says.

A shared table is the focus at another restaurant, this time at the higher end of the Roman dining scale. One of the first things you notice as you enter the low-lit, minimalist interior of Retrobottega (retro-bottega.com), a few steps from the Pantheon, are the huge communal tables (part of a 2018 refit by Roman-Australian design firm Morq), which are unheard of in an elegant restaurant like this in old Rome.

“Sitting at one big table and sharing is fantastic,” says co-owner Alessandro Miocchi. “At the start, no one knows each other, but by the end you see them chatting away about the food, offering bits to try.” Alessandro launched the restaurant with fellow chef and business partner Giuseppe Lo Iudice after they met while working for celebrated chef Anthony Genovese at two-Michelin-starred Il Pagliaccio in the city.

Retrobottega has a luxe feel, but it’s informal – you set your own place with a paper mat and cutlery from a drawer – and its formula is straightforward: “We want to focus on simplicity of taste,” Alessandro says.

Every Monday, he and Giuseppe drive out to the mountains in Abruzzo to meet an ethnobotanist they work with. “In April and the beginning of May, the foraging grounds explode into life,” says Alessandro, producing pictures of the wild garlic, wood sorrel and thistle they’d gathered the day before. When cleaned of prickles, the thistle has a tender, tasty stem. One of the chefs’ signature dishes, *crepinette*, makes use of these foraged greens, encasing them in a lacy net of caul fat to make a neat parcel. “When it’s cooking, the steam from the herbs cooks the fat, which →

GIUSEPPE LO IUDICE AND
Alessandro Miocchi (top left) created Retrobottega to offer fine dining (above) in informal surroundings. When it comes to sights, however, Rome is still all about the classics (right)

“In April and the beginning of May, the foraging grounds explode into life”





“Reinventing classics is risky, but we have a mantra: stomach first, mind later”

also melts down into the herbs,” Alessandro explains. The dish is traditionally made with sausage meat rather than wild greens. It can’t be easy reinventing classic cuisine like this? “It’s not,” he says. “It’s risky, because people have certain expectations.” But the duo have a mantra: “stomach first, mind later”, meaning their primary job is to send customers away satisfied, with the bonus that the dishes are thought-provoking too.

It’s clearly working. Retrovino, their *enoteca* (wine bar), will open on Via d’Ascanio around the corner this spring, the latest outpost in a growing empire that includes Retropasta, their pasta lab next door, which sells handmade pastas and sauces daily, and which opened at the end of 2018.

It gives the pair a foot in the door of the more-accessible creative dining market. Daring cooking at the higher level is still quite rare in Rome, but for a plate of good food at the more casual end, there are many places worth heading to, including the always busy Pianostrada Laboratorio di Cucina ([fb.com/pianostrada](https://www.facebook.com/pianostrada)) between the river Tiber and the Campo de’ Fiori, and “local kitchen” Urbana47 (urbana47.it/en), one of several noteworthy spots in the creative neighbourhood of Monti. →



BROTHERS PAULO AND Daniele Camponeschi (above) are the food and wine aficionados behind Menabó in the Centocelle neighbourhood



DISHES AT MENABÓ, SUCH as fava bean puree with sautéed turnip tops, roasted tomatoes and cottage cheese (above), feature modest ingredients in modern incarnations, in contrast to Rome's famous ancient sights like the Colosseum (top right)

Head 8km outside Rome's centre to Centocelle and you'll find another hub of culinary creativity around the Gardenie metro station. Menabó ([fb.com/enotecamenabo](https://www.facebook.com/enotecamenabo)) offers a wine list of 200 labels and a menu of punchy dishes such as chestnut flour tagliatelle with squash and ricotta or trippa alla Romana spiked with mint. Brothers Daniele and Paolo Camponeschi opened the doors in February 2018 after a rapid refit – with the help of their dad – polishing up the 1950s marble-chip floor and making shelves and lighting out of industrial materials. They designed the railway carriage-inspired seating themselves and had it made locally.

“Food and wine are equally important here – like two tramlines, they work in parallel,” says Paolo, who cooks, while Daniele takes care of the



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wine list. Both enjoy the interaction they can have with customers in a restaurant of 30 seats, taking the time to ask what people would like to eat and tweaking dishes to suit, and talking about the wines, many of which are made using biodynamic and natural methods. The brothers went to school in the neighbourhood and both worked in kitchens while at university – Paolo studied history and Daniele studied languages, going on to work as a simultaneous translator. They bring a wealth of knowledge to their Menabó roles.

As you wander through Rome's streets, it becomes clear that these culinary developments aren't just about dishes on the menu. Tradition and quality are everything. Food shoppers 2,000 years ago at Trajan's market – the first covered shopping centre in history – would not feel out of place at the street food stalls of Testaccio market today. And the abattoir workers of the 1880s would appreciate the zero-waste philosophy of today's chefs. Many layers of history later, it's good to know a new generation of chefs, who care about where our food comes from and how it's farmed, are taking the best of it, breaking down barriers and creating a new connection around the tables of Rome.

✈ Wizz Air flies to Rome