

Theo Randall's guide to foodie Verona

January 13 2019, 12:01am,

The chef's affair with Italian cuisine began when he worked at the River Café. It led him to the city of love. Romeo and Juliet, eat your heart out

Interview by Alessia Horwich



Buon appetito: cicchettiALAMY

Verona is the most fantastic place to go for a weekend. Each April, there's an important wine fair, Vinitaly. When I was at the River Café, I used to go with Rose Gray, the restaurant's co-founder.

Theo RandallALAMY

We'd use it as inspiration and generally as a chance to have a fantastic time. Ever since, I've just loved the city. The architecture and streets are beautiful — everything is covered in marble.

My favourite spot is Piazza delle Erbe, where you can watch the world go by sitting in a cafe. Or climb the Torre dei Lamberti, which has an

incredible view of the city and surrounding region ([£7; torredeilamberti.it](#)). You can see for miles. But when I go, I usually go to eat.

If you ask an Englishman which is their favourite food region in Italy, they'll probably say Tuscany, but all Italians know about the Valpolicella region around Verona. It has fantastic produce and an awful lot of wine — including Amarone and Bardolino.



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The best food is to be found in the little trattorias and osterias, where the menus feature local produce and aren't trying to impress. The first I go to is just off Piazza delle Erbe, a small place with no real signage, called **Trattoria Al Pompiere**.

When you walk in, the walls are crowded with pictures. In the main restaurant there are two counters, one that serves cheese and one that serves *salumi* [cured meats], each with a dedicated chef.

The menu tells you all the different regions that the *salumi* come from.

Most are local, and it's all artisan. It arrives on an enormous plate with a selection of pickles and it's the most wonderful thing.

Then you have to have the perfect risotto, which has a lovely bite to it — it's for two people and takes 25 minutes to prepare. What's in it depends solely on the season; for example, in spring it's always asparagus. Next you have the cheese, and it's all matched to one of the great wines they have on their list (mains from £11; alpompriere.com).

Well aged: Antica Bottega del VinoALAMY

At **Antica Bottega del Vino**, on the Via Scudo di Francia, just off Via Mazzini, the wine is the main attraction. It's a beautiful restaurant, hundreds of years old, with stained-glass windows and a wine cellar about three times the size of the restaurant — the list looks like an old-school telephone directory. It serves excellent food — such as Amarone wine risotto — but it's special because of its Coravin wine system, which uses argon gas and a needle to extract wine from bottles without the need to uncork them. The idea is that you can have just one glass from a really expensive bottle. I remember going there with Rose one lunchtime, 20 years ago, and we had a plate of cheese and treated ourselves to a glass of the most extraordinary Amarone by a winemaker called Quintarelli. What he produced cost crazy money. We had an enormous glass, which cost about £45. It seems mad, but I've never drunk it since, and I'll never forget it (mains from £14; bottegapini.it).

Near Romeo and Juliet's balcony is the **Osteria Giulietta e Romeo** — it has a corny name, but the food is superb. The decor is traditional: check tablecloths, tiled floor, black-and-white photos on the wall. They really like their horsemeat in Verona, and at this place they brine and smoke it, so it comes out like bresaola, an air-dried beef that's usually cut very thin. In my favourite dish, the meat is shredded, almost like corned beef, but dry, and they serve it with these tiny sweet radicchios. It comes with balsamic vinegar and usually parmesan and olive oil, and you dress it yourself. When you're eating it, you can't believe it's horsemeat (£18 for two courses; osteriagiuliettae.romeo.it).

On the pulse: bean and pasta soup at
Al PompieresANDRA
RACCANELLO/4CORNERS IMAGES

Verona isn't by the sea, so the wonderful fish restaurant **L'Oste Scuro**, near Ponte di Castelvecchio, is quite unusual. They do this thing called *rombo al sale*, which is a whole turbot roasted in salt. It inspired lots of salt baking at the River Café. The long dining room is split into alcoves under stone arches. You book a big table for 10 people and they bring out the turbot, break into the crust at the table, pull off the skin and serve these perfect chunks of steaming hot fish, dressed with olive oil and served with a vegetable such as spinach. They also do a wonderful risotto with prawns, mussels, clams and red mullet. The stock is made from all the bones and shells, a little bit of tomato and parsley and the juice from the fish. Then they put roasted turbot on top, so it's similar to a paella, and the flavour is extraordinary. Everything they do is fantastic, from a simple crab salad to fish stews (risotto for two, £20; ristoranteostescuro.tv).

If I'm in town and I don't want a huge meal, the perfect place to go for drinks and *cicchetti* — Venice's answer to tapas — is Tapasotto, just off Via Valerio Catullo. It's bright and modern, with high tables, white stools and hams and *salumi* hanging from a wooden rack. They do a delicious dish of tiny baby squid braised with garlic, olive oil and white wine, served with polenta. You can also get a plate of five or six types of crostini — you'll have broad beans smashed with mint and pecorino, ragu of horsemeat, or *lardo*, which is back fat from pork. They have a great wine list and wonderful cheeses, such as gorgonzola *naturale* (my favourite), and a young pecorino, which in spring works well tossed in a salad with tiny raw broad beans, a few leaves and olive oil (small plates from £6.50; tapasotto.it).

If you venture out of town, there's a little restaurant called the **Groto de Corgnan**, in Sant'Ambrogio di Valpolicella, a working wine town about 30 minutes' drive away. It's exactly how you imagine a rural Italian restaurant to be, surrounded by vineyards and like a labyrinth inside. It's hard to believe how many people they cram in. You walk inside and there's pasta drying on a table, so they move the pasta, or there are bottles of wine and

they move them so you can sit down. I went in spring and had *taglierini*, a very fine egg pasta, with tiny peas, crumbled local pork sausage that tasted like salami, and butter. It was so simple, but delicious (reservation essential; eight courses £65; grotodecorgnan.it).

Theo Randall worked at the River Café for 17 years and is now the head chef at his own London restaurant, Theo Randall at the InterContinental (parklane.intercontinental.com).

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