



Life & Leisure

Life & Luxury

Food & Wine

After 30 years at McDonald's, this exec bought a restaurant in Italy

It took Australian Judy Harman a split second to decide to buy Groto de Corgnan, renowned for its seasonal, regional and delicious fare.

Brisbane-raised Judy Harman clocked up 30 years working for McDonald's. She started at the counter as a teenager and worked her way up to managing director and then new business development officer, responsible for running or opening McDonald's in countries including Italy, Finland, Singapore, the Czech Republic and Vietnam.

Then, almost overnight, she bought a delightful little restaurant with a big reputation for traditional cuisine in northern Italy.

Groto de Corgnan, which has been listed in the Michelin Guide continuously since 1981, is named for the stream that runs beneath the kitchen and the street it is on, in the commune of Sant'Ambrogio di Valpolicella, about 15 kilometres north-west of Verona.

Opened in 1980, it specialises in local food cooked the traditional way. The menu changes almost daily, favouring what is seasonal, fresh and mouthwatering.

To this end, Harman's husband, Jonny Blackwell, forages in the Po valley for ingredients such as wild mushrooms, spinach and nettles. He sources ingredients including truffles, guinea fowl and vegetables from local suppliers and gardeners, and sardines from fishermen on nearby Lake Garda.

Groto de Corgnan could not, in other words, be less like the international fast-food behemoth that is McDonald's. But Harman, now 53, says her decision to acquire it was instant.

The couple, who met while working for McDonald's in Prague, discovered Groto de Corgnan on a trip to Italy in the late 1990s, when they were recommended a place to eat near their hotel. They enjoyed it so much, they made a special trip to eat there at least once a year – for the next 16 years.

Then, in 2015, they were dining at Groto to celebrate Blackwell's 50th birthday when the owner and founder, Giorgio Soave, announced that, after 35 years, he was closing the business he'd founded in 1980.



Giorgio Soave, the former owner of Groto de Corgnan, keeps a keen eye on Harman's handiwork during her two-year "apprenticeship".

The couple made the move and Harman committed herself to her studies at the chef's side, but it took time for Soave to appreciate she was serious. She drew on her people and business skills, as well as her knowledge and love of food, and eventually, he deemed she was good enough to take the reins of his business. The deal was done.



Harman and her husband (and forager) Jonny Blackwell, who fortunately loves Italy too.

"Those first months on my own were incredibly difficult," she says. "Before we came along, Giorgio had already told his customers he was closing the doors, so they weren't coming any more. We were scraping along with about 30 covers a week."

Then the pandemic hit and the doors were closed for five months.

In what Harman describes as karma, her fortunes changed suddenly and dramatically last year, when the producers of a popular Italian food show, *4 Ristoranti*, got in touch.

The TV program, hosted by celebrity chef and household name Alessandro Borghese, compares four similar restaurants for service, menu, price and location. After comprehensive auditions, Harman and her restaurant were selected, and the episode aired on January 2 this year.

I love trying new dishes and sharing them. It remains one of my greatest joys in life.

— Judy Harman

She came second on the show, but that didn't matter. Just being on *4 Ristoranti* put Groto de Corgnan on the Italian foodie map and the business took off.

"Bookings went through the roof after the show," Harman says. "Like any very popular restaurant, you just couldn't get a table for months. Now it averages 45 people a sitting."

We lunched in Groto's sunny little courtyard in June with friends based in Rome, after they'd watched Harman holding her own among the Italian chefs and restaurateurs on the show.

The 30-minute drive to Sant'Ambrogio di Valpolicella from Verona takes visitors through a rich green valley irrigated by Italy's longest river, the Po. The last bit of the drive is through a light industrial area, and then, a minute further along a village street, there is the delightful, converted house that is home to Groto de Corgnan.

The rooms have been turned into dining spaces and decorated with pictures and photographs, many of them of

Harman and Blackwell swimming, skiing, hiking, running and climbing, often at competitive level.

In Noosa, the couple are Legends, meaning they have done more than 10 of the town's annual triathlons. They did 12 years consecutively before COVID-19 struck, and will be back again for another in October this year.

"Having a race coming up is a great motivator to train," Harman says. "And because I love and indulge in good food and wine, I need to exercise regularly to keep myself in balance."

The entry to her eatery is a picture-postcard courtyard of tables, dressed with crisp white linen and fine glassware. The area is surrounded with boxes of flowering plants and shaded by a vine-covered pergola. Inside, a homely open fireplace burns even in summer, as it is used for toasting bread.

There are more than 30 restaurants nearby and, according to TripAdvisor, Harman's establishment rates No 1.

The produce sourced by Blackwell is put together in a menu that includes refined salads, delicious homemade pastas and sauces, and locally grown lamb, duck and beef. Those hand-gathered nettles and fresh raw porcini mushrooms are likely to be on the menu along with zucchini flowers, and it is no trouble to order vegetarian. Black truffles appear often.

The region of Valpolicella is renowned for its robust red wines and Harman takes the time to explain and compare five favourite local drops.

She usually has a chef at her side but, when I last spoke to her on the phone from Sydney, he had just become a father, so she was in the kitchen on her own.



Harman, right, and the team at Groto de Corgnan.

But then, having learnt the basics of cooking from her grandfather as a child, she is up to the challenge. "By the age of 14, I was inviting friends over for dinner parties and preparing four- or five-course dinners for them," she says. "I'd use interesting ingredients such as venison and quail and make crêpes Suzette and bombe Alaska."

Little has changed. "I love trying new dishes and sharing them. It remains one of my greatest joys in life."

Harman agrees her story is remarkable – "of course with loads of hard work and challenges, but I consider myself very fortunate to have been able to realise my dream of a little restaurant in Italy".

When she took over Groto de Corgnan, she planned to keep everything she first loved about the place: the hand-made pastas, the traditions, the small suppliers and the best seasonal ingredients.

If the proof is in the tasting, she has succeeded in doing just that.

Susan Bredow, Aug 18, 2022

"On the spot I put a plan to Giorgio," says Harman. "We would move from Sydney and I would work alongside him for two years and learn everything he could teach me."

It didn't take much for Blackwell to agree. As a confirmed Italophile who majored in the language at university, he had spent several years living in Italy already.