

FOOD AND DRINK

RESTAURANTS

In the land of the bean-eaters

Sue Style has happy memories of her meal earlier this year in a hideaway in the foothills of the Apuan Alps

As you cruise south along the coast-hugging Via Aurelia, just south of La Spezia at the gateway to Tuscany, you start to see white gashes in the hillsides.

These are the marble quarries of Carrara, where Michelangelo used to select his raw materials. Nearby is Il Bottaccio di Montignoso, a hideaway restaurant and hotel in the foothills of the Apuan Alps near Massa.

This is a favourite haunt of artists and sundry beautiful people seeking a little light relief from the chic shops and the deep bass beat of the discos of elegant Forte dei Marmi. (The Colombian artist Fernando Botero has an *atelier* close by and the neighbouring town of Pietrasanta hosted a street exhibi-

tion of his sculptures earlier this year.)

Nino Mosca, who seamlessly combines the roles of Il Bottaccio's manager, host, chef and occasional guitarist is, by his own admission, an expert in many fields – cooking, wines, music and art, all of which can be enjoyed here to the full. The restaurant, housed in an 18th century olive mill, does double duty as a showcase for the owners' considerable art collection.

Dinner is preceded by a meeting over a glass of wine (a Sauvignon from Trentino does the job nicely), in which Mosca explores diners' tastes and foibles and makes seasonal suggestions.

The menu established, guests proceed to the dining

room and the show begins. Tables are arranged round a small swimming pool (more decorative than functional); there's a great jazz pianist with an eclectic repertoire.

The food we sampled was

The main course was a perfectly poached piece of beef fillet in a strip of lardo di Colonnata

artfully presented and startlingly tasty, with interesting texture contrasts.

All pasta, bread (chewy and olive-laden) and pastries are home-made, fish comes mainly from the Ligurian coast, meat from the butcher round the corner in Montignoso and many of the vege-

tables are sourced from Massa's wonderful market.

Fillets of red mullet in a basil sauce with wild rice cut an initial dash, the scarlet skin of the spanking fresh fish offset by the jet-black rice, the whole pres-

ented on a black-rimmed white plate.

Tuscans are famed as *mangiafagioli* (bean-eaters), but the ensuing soup of fresh *fagiolini* in an assertive seafood broth with chunks of shellfish would surely have pleased even a hardened *fagio-phobe*.

Mosca moves from kitchen to dining room with great energy and agility, sometimes commandeering the stand designed for the bottle bucket as a sort of bar stool, as he perches beside the table to check and catch up on things.

The Poggio Capitana 1994, a Sangiovese from Grosseto, interesting without being memorable, went well with a dish of ravioli filled with a delicate, crumbled sausage from the local butcher (who also supplies the excellent salami for the crostini) in a leek sauce, set about with glistening halves of cherry tomatoes.

The main course was a perfectly poached piece of beef fillet corseted in a wafer-thin strip of *lardo di*

Colonnata, the latter a local speciality of pork back fat which has been sprinkled with rosemary, sandwiched between cool slabs of Carrara marble and left to mature.

To go with it were some crunchy, intensely flavoured, wide satin bands of vegetable (carrot, courgette, pepper), barely cooked and coiled together like *pappardelle*.

A selection of sorbets and a tulip glass of Vin Santo wrapped things up perfectly.

Mosca offers cooking courses in the quieter months and a cookbook is also mooted.

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