

PASSION FOR PRODUCE

BORN IN A WINE CELLAR, MASSAGED ALONG THE WAY BY WINE, CHEESE, CHARCUTERIE AND PASTA, ENOTECA ROSSO IS ABOUT MORE THAN SUPERB ITALIAN FOOD AND WINE. THE KENSINGTON HOTSPOT PROMOTES ITALIAN-STYLE MEALTIMES OF CHATTING OVER PRODUCE. GISELLE WHITEAKER DISCUSSES DINING.



Literally, an *enoteca* is a wine repository. In Italy, traditionally, an *enoteca* was a place to go and imbibe wine, often on the way to another spot for a full meal. Times, though, are changing. Nowadays, most *enoteca* serve at least light appetisers. And an *enoteca* in the UK? Well that's a whole new ballgame.

I'll confess, I like the idea of dining in a wine library - and Enoteca Rosso, on Kensington High Street in London, certainly looks the part. It's hard to imagine this cavernous space was once a bank and then a spa, although the pillars, high-coffered ceiling and sections of mosaic floor hint at prior lives, as does the private dining space downstairs, inside the old bank safe. There's a somewhat industrial vibe on ground level, with steel chairs, filament lights hung on red wires, and a lengthy counter running below the windows, where solo drinkers and diners can sit inconspicuously and sip on *aperitivo*. It's the walls of terracotta triangles, though, that enforce the library concept and add the wow factor, the triangles housing hundreds of bottles from the voluminous, all-Italian wine list.

There are far too many wines for a grape novice, so we pass the responsibility of pairing back to the sommelier. Orders in, we nibble on Kermit-green, fleshy, overgrown Castelvetro olives and soft-yet-crusty focaccia, brown and charcoal bread, dipped in afternoon-sun-yellow olive oil. We are ready to be taken on a culinary journey. We quickly tip our hat to the sommelier, who aids us in sipping our way across Italy. Our favourite drop of the evening is an easy-drinking Cavaceppo Passerina from Il Conte Villa Prandone.

The food from Head Chef Flavio Militello also deserves recognition. We start with a tartare trio: tuna with a dressing of spring onions and citrus; salmon and avocado; and amberjack tail with green apples. Contrasting textures and levels of sweet and sour make each of the circle-shaped mounds of fresh fish an adventures for the taste buds.

Next up is the chef's selection of cold cuts and cheese. Chef Flavio is clearly feeling generous, as the slate delivered to the table is piled high with culatello, mortadella with pistachios, a semi-hard buffalo milk cheese, a goat cheese soaked with grapes from the area, and assorted crispbreads and grissini.

ABOVE
A selection of dishes at Enoteca Rosso.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
Lamb ragout with tagliatelle; Castelvetrano olives; Piedmont ravioli; Enoteca Rosso features an all-Italian wine menu; red gnocchi; welcome to the library.

"That does not taste like normal mortadella; it has such a rich flavour," says my boyfriend Elio, his eyes wide with delight. He should know - he's half Italian. "I think there might be ... truffle oil?" he posits. He's right. The whole concept of truffled mortadella makes me rethink my apathy towards the light pink sausage. In this form, it's delectable.

Another light dish follows - *agnolotti del plin*, a traditional Piedmont ravioli filled with pistachio. It's served on a layer of sweet prawn tartare, finished with prawn bisque. The resulting nutty sweetness is a real palate-pleaser, as is the following bowl of gnocchi, made with dried tomatoes. The red gnocchi, green basil veloute and stark white burrata cheese unintentionally represent the colours of the Italian flag and the intense flavours are proudly patriotic to Italy's fresh produce focus.

The next pasta dish sees a mound of white lamb ragout with fresh oregano sitting on perfectly al dente saffron tagliatelle. The lamb mince is surprisingly delicate, lightly fragranced, allowing the home-made pasta to be the star. It's so delicious we mop up every drizzle of sauce with the remaining chunks of bread, returning our plates clean.

Our final savoury selection is caramelised duck with crunchy endive and creamy sweet potato. Found more

often in northern Italian dishes, the duck slices here are tender, the honeyed undertones enhanced by the smooth sweet potato. It's a pleasant side-step from pasta, representing the diversity that's not always seen in Italian eateries.

Feeling rather full, we accept the offer of a dessert taster, rather than full portions. Three bite-sized morsels - Lady Berry, Chef's Mousse, and the Caprese - are duly delivered. The Lady Berry sees puff pastry paired with pink cream cheese, served with forest fruits, which give a tangy edge that cuts through the sweetness; the beetroot and cheese mousse combines salty and sweet with a silky smooth texture; and the decadent Caprese chocolate almond cake with Guinness ganache, salted caramel and banana ice-cream finishes us with its deep, rich intensity.

Enoteca Rosso may have strayed from the traditional *enoteca* concept with the addition of an extensive menu, but it's stayed true to presenting Italian wine and food in the best possible light. Carefully curated, yet retaining the simplicity and focus on fresh produce Italian food is known for, Enoteca Rosso is worth talking in the library about.

For more information about Enoteca Rosso or to book your Italian culinary journey, see www.enotecarosso.com.