

<http://mycustardpie.com/2013/03/02/review-carluccios-dubai-wine-matching-italian-food/>

Simple Italian food – with clever wine matching

March 2, 2013

tags: [Antonio Carluccio](#), [Dubai](#), [Italian food](#), [Jameson Fink](#), [Taste of Dubai](#), [wine](#)



My pulse was getting quicker by the minute as I paced up and down in Gatwick airport; the check-in desk was about to close and my friend hadn't arrived. Should I board the plane alone? Passport in hand, I was doing just that when she strolled up leisurely, her relaxed face turning to horror when she realised she'd misread the time on the ticket. We got the last two seats on the plane, upgraded to first (i.e. two seats at the front of the plane behind a curtain) and we were off to Italy. If alcohol was available I'm sure I downed it in one. The first time you travel without small children is a liberating experience; mine were one and three years old and I'd been stuck on a compound in Saudi Arabia for the first years of their lives. Freedom and Florence; what an intoxicating mix.

Art, artefacts and food probably sums up the trip. We ate simple meals at student hangouts and pavement restaurants off the beaten track. The highlight was Sunday lunch in the early Spring sunshine with a huge platter of mixed seafood, sparkingly fresh, salty and sweet with a bottle of wine.



Italian food seems to have captivated the world more than any other cuisine. But not content with the intense, simple flavours and fresh produce it's based on, people have had the urge to modify, tinker and complicate. Take chicken tikka pizza for instance (just wrong on so many levels), stuffed cheese crusts; I heard Italian tapas advertised the other day. Chain restaurants and processed food manufacturers are the main culprits for these aberrations (although 'Britalian' food abounds to0). Is it possible to find well-cooked Italian food on the High Street or in a shopping mall?

At the end of our Italian weekend back in 2000, Jane went back to Surbiton and I moved to Dubai; we next met up a couple of years later in [Kingston-upon-Thames](#) at Carluccio's. It was one of the first branches to open outside London and I remember a beautifully prepared risotto and a good bottle of red wine. I loved the combination of a casual but stylish setting, shelves of Italian ingredients, and a simple menu prepared well.



The chain expanded over the years and Antonio Carluccio left the company; at one time he railed publicly against the restaurants doubting whether the quality could be maintained at such scale. In 2010, Landmark – a Dubai-based company – acquired Carluccio's and now retains its founder as a consultant. By all accounts he is committed to ensuring that the restaurants that bear his name live up to his 'mof mof' philosophy i.e. minimum of fuss, maximum of flavour.

I've visited Carluccio's in Dubai Mall many times since it opened, particularly when we have visitors, as it offers a mid-priced casual meal with a great view of the Dubai fountains from the terrace. The menu is simple but well executed, the interior light, airy and stylish.

As the restaurant is in the Dubai Mall (rather than the other side of the fountains in the licensed Souk al Bahar) you can't order a glass of wine to sip with your meal at Carluccio's. However this *is* possible at the annual [Taste of Dubai Festival](#), happening this year between 14th – 16th March 2013 and I was invited to lunch to taste the menu they'll be serving this year. We were given the actual portion sizes, which were generous, and met Alessandro Zulian the head chef (all Carluccio restaurants head chefs are Italian) who answered our questions.



The stock for the risotto is home made and Alessandro roasts the chicken bones and onions in the oven to intensify the flavour and uses carnaroli rice (from the Maremma area near his home). All the filled pasta for the restaurant is freshly made by hand with flour from the South of Italy, and the dried pasta is also sent from Puglia. The risotto is made from scratch both in the restaurant and at Taste of Dubai (in many kitchens it is par-cooked and finished off); with the latter they make a large pot but will discard any remaining after an hour and make a new batch. Leaf gelatine is used for the panna cotta giving a lovely soft, silky texture (which is impossible with the powdered stuff). The gelato is made by a small Italian supplier in Dubai where it is made from local milk in a traditional way.

Of all the items on the menu, the risotto was my favourite – and for me the test of a good restaurant. The texture was creamy with depth of flavour and a tiny drizzle of olive oil flecked with rosemary which lifted it to ‘plate-scraping’ (and forgetting to take a photo) standards. The penne was created by Antonio Carluccio at the launch of the Ealing restaurant when they ran out of risotto. Using available ingredients he came up with the dish which is now the most popular on their menu in the UK.

The wines to be served at Taste of Dubai haven’t been announced yet so I thought it would be fun to give some wine matching ideas for this menu. [Jameson Fink](#), expert wine writer, blogger and broadcaster (excellent podcasts called [Wine without Worry](#)) was kind enough to oblige. The prices are for the dishes at Taste of Dubai and in United Arab Emirate Dirhams.



Carluccio's menu for Taste of Dubai 2013 with wine matching recommendations from Jameson Fink

Antipasti

Arancini Di Riso Sicilani – Crispy saffron risotto balls filled with melting mozzarella (AED 15)

Start out with some bubbles: a refreshing glass of Prosecco will be a nice contrast to the crispy fried exterior of the arancini and the salty cheese inside. I like the [Adami Garbèl](#).

Secondi

Risotto al Limone con Pollo – Lemon chicken risotto (AED 20)

This dish seems tailor-made for an adventure in Italian white wine. Try [Scarpetta's Pinot Grigio](#) from the Veneto. I am also a huge fan of Greco di Tufo or Fiano di Avellino from [Mastroberardino](#) in Campania. That should help you cover some ground in Italy. Actually, get all three.

Penne Giardiniera – Penne with courgette, chilli and deep fried spinach balls with Parmesan and garlic (AED 20)

You know I had to look up “courgette”? Now I feel like an idiot. But, on the plus side, I am now free to write “colour” and “flavour.” Which I love. Speaking of love, you know I can't talk about wine without mentioning rosé. A well-chilled bottle would be the perfect partner for a dish full of strong-flavored chili and garlic. And rosé is a vegetable-loving wine. I've always liked the [Maculan Costadolio](#). It's not often you see a rosé made from 100% Merlot. Beautiful colour and flavour. (See what I did there?)

Dolci

Panna Vanilla – A delicious lemon and vanilla flavoured set cream with a raspberry coulis and fresh raspberries (AED 15)

I'm kind of torn between a Moscato d'Asti and a Brachetto d'Acqui. Both are fizzy, sweet, and low in alcohol. The former is like drinking a bowlful of peaches and pears. The latter, like drinking a bowlful of red berries. Get a bottle of each. I'm a fan of the [Vietti](#) Moscato and the [Marenco](#) Brachetto.

If none of these specific wines are available in your area, ask your friendly wine merchant to recommend a bottling of the same wine (Prosecco, Greco di Tufo, etc) from another producer. Cheers!

Gelati – Strawberry, chocolate and vanilla ice cream and lemon sorbet (2 x scoops AED 20)

More about Jameson:



Jameson Fink enjoying crisps (ok then potato chips) and white Burgundy

Eight years ago I moved from Chicago to Seattle to pursue all things wine in a full-time manner. I daydream about Champagne and popcorn together forever, and also enjoy watching Pawn Stars while drinking rosé.

[Read Jameson's blog](#) or download [Wine Without Worry podcasts](#)

In its sixth year, Taste of Dubai is one of the highlights of the foodie calendar in Dubai; there are more restaurants than ever this year and the usual smattering of celebrity chefs. I'm particularly interested in the [Dine in the Dark](#) concept by chef Andy Campbell which is a new innovation. It'll be interesting to see how many restaurants bring something new and how many churn out the same menu (no more white tomato soup please Mr Rhodes). Bands are being flown in from the UK including [The Noisettes](#). Local bands are there too – but not truly local food; organisers please take note.

See you by the risotto with a glass of wine....

