

- ♦ Estratto dal "The New York Times" in data 23 Gennaio 2000

Rediscovering fine traditional cuisine near the city's great basilicas CESARE(St.Peter's)

For a meal worthy of a Renaissance pope, take a relatively short taxi ride from St.Peter's up Monte Mario to the Cavalieri Hilton Hotel and dine at La Pergola, probably the best restaurant in Rome (and one of the most expensive).

But those wishing to stay nearer the Vatican will do very well indeed at Cesare, a superb old-style restaurant serving Roman and Tuscan fare made from very fine ingredients. A glass case filled with fresh fish greets diners as they enter, and the theme continues in the tastefully painted marine motifs in the long half-paneled dining room. Nevertheless, the menu offers a wide range of both meat and fish antipasti, pastas and soups and main courses. We were served by an old-school waiter, the kind who knows just what you want to eat even if you don't. Thus I accepted an antipasto of insalata di mare, one of the freshest, tenderest seafood salads (containing shrimp, mussels, squid, cuttlefish and celery strips dressed with oil, lemon and parsley) I have tasted. Octopus salad featured the superior polipo verace, distinguishable by two rows of suckers on the tentacles.

Spaghetti all'amatriciana, which followed, was tomato sauce with bits of guanciale (cured pork), hot pepper and pecorino cheese, the latter not brought to the table. The Tuscan bean and farro (emmer) soup equally hearty and delicious, served with good green oil, but we had to ask for the pepper mill.

The excellent saltimbocca alla romana was butter-tender slices of veal, topped with prosciutto and fresh sage, sautéed in white wine. Franco's abbacchio scottadito (grilled baby lamb chops), meant to be picked up and gnawed, were delicious as well. People often forget that Roman food also means extraordinary vegetables, such as carciofo (artichoke) alla romana, entirely edible and redolent of mentuccia (penny-royal), and tender green chicory leaves, boiled, then sautéed with olive oil, garlic and hot pepper. To close, a torta di mele, apples and custard in a pie crust, was appropriately homely.

Wanting a light red wine, we chose vino novello Toscano IGT San Giocondo (\$11,75) in preference to the many big Italian reds and French labels. The house wines are also offered by the glass - a rarity.