

Quisine.





Wild mushroom risotto, a seasonal dish served in the restaurant of the grand Hotel Vittoria; Via Beccaria (left), which leads to the centuries-old Piazza Paolo VI, one of Brescia's central squares



I'M LEANING against the well-worn marble counter of an old-school tavern, the kind of place with vaulted ceilings, wooden beams and checkered tablecloths where elderly men while away the afternoon playing cards over a carafe of local wine. Across the counter, a wiry barman is pouring a *pirlo*, the traditional pre-lunch tippie in the northern Italian city of Brescia. It's a practised slosh of white wine from a two-litre bottle, a splash of Campari and a spray from the soda siphon. "It's like a spritz," I say, referring to the ubiquitously fashionable orange-red version made with Aperol – sweeter and lower in alcohol than Campari. The barman fixes me with a stare. "None of that 'spritz' stuff here," he intones. "If you want one of those, you'd better go elsewhere – Milan, maybe." Ouch.

Just an hour east of Milan and another hour west of Verona, Brescia suffers from something of a poor-cousin syndrome. But poor it's not. This is a post-industrial powerhouse at the foot of the Alps, best known for heavy industry and, somewhat grimly, successful manufacturers such as the Beretta firearms factory. The Romans, who established their first northern colony here in 27BC, called it Brixia.

I've been coming here for many years, since meeting Giuliano, the Brescian who is now my husband. At first

VIVA APERITIVO!

From *pirlo* and pasta to prosciutto and pastries, the food of Brescia rivals that of Italy's most famed destinations. Honorary local **Joanna Savill** eats and drinks her way around this deliciously surprising city.

I found it a strange place: wealthy but a little dour, with a reserved northern-ness that, once cracked, reveals classic Italian generosity, humour and warmth. And, yes, Brescia has a bit of a complex. "We don't have a Romeo and Juliet," says local guidebook editor Adonella Palladino, referring

to neighbouring Verona. "This whole place is just waiting to be explored."

Not only is the Brescia region home to some of Italy's most scenic lakes and mountains, as manufacturing declines it's also starting to play to other strengths. The hills and valleys around lakes Garda and Iseo

are full of artisan produce – cheeses, smallgoods and Garda's prized olive oil – as well as the acclaimed sparkling wines of the Franciacorta DOCG (regional quality assurance designation).

"The region runs for 150 kilometres from north to south," says chef Gianmario Portesani. "There are so many food influences." His tasting menu at the prestigious Hotel Vittoria (20 Via X Giornate; hotelvittoria.com) is a case in point: delicate lake fish, grilled local sausage over artisan polenta and the ravioli-like filled pasta known as *casoncelli* (casoncei in dialect).

Like many Italian cities, Brescia's food traditions are anchored in a rustic past. Just outside the centre, its weekly farmers' market (Wednesdays, Via Crocifissa di Rosa; terrebresciane.it) abounds with fresh produce, including an organic section. Although better for cheap cotton T-shirts and underwear, the more downscale Saturday market (around Piazza della Loggia, the main square) offers rows of local smallgoods and famed alpine cheeses, some simply described as "nostrano" (homegrown). And who can resist the stall with the sign saying, "We have the best-looking customers" (*solo noi abbiamo i clienti più belli*)?

For full immersion into the homegrown, venture beyond the centre to Borgo Trento, a historic village now swallowed up by the city suburbs. Raoul Porteri

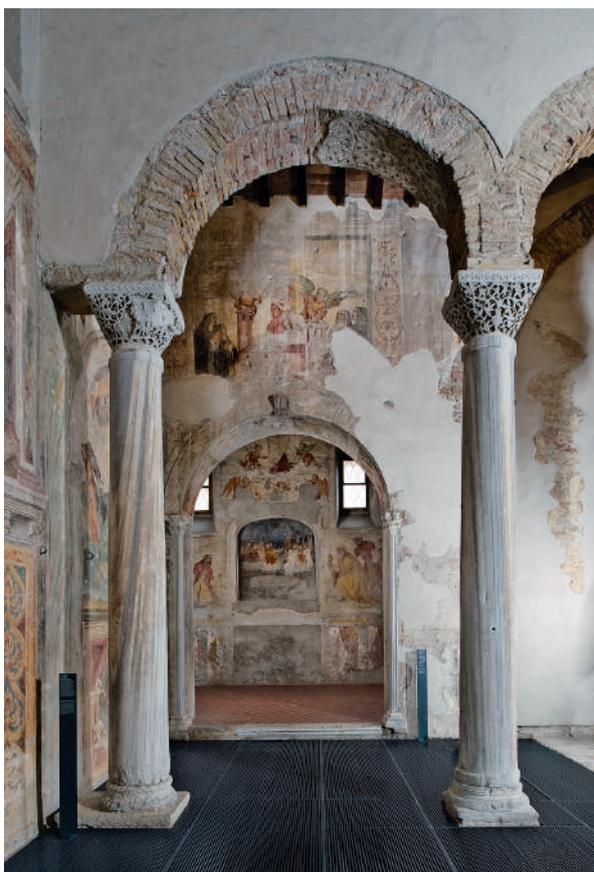


is the fourth-generation owner of Borgo Trento's 140-year-old wine store and delicatessen, Salumeria Gastronomia Porteri (52 Via Trento; trattoriaporteri.it). The low-ceilinged shop is crammed with local cheeses, cotechino (rich pork sausage) and carefully cured prosciutto and salami – “not too aged, medium cut, not too fatty”, he dictates, cutting a slice for me to try. A dark cellar restaurant is hung with flags, memorabilia and tributes to yesteryear. “My father died 40 years ago,” says Porteri, “but I know he’s still around here somewhere.”

By contrast, nearby Pasticceria Veneto is a gleaming, almost blandly modern, pastry shop and café (8 Via Salvo D’Acquisto; iginiomassari.it). Chatting with owner Iginio Massari, it soon becomes clear – as children and their parents clamour for selfies with “the Maestro” – that he is



(Clockwise from top) Locally cured meats hang in the cellar of Osteria al Bianchi; Brescia from above; Lombard-era San Salvatore’s church in the Santa Giulia museum complex



quite a star. Acclaimed as one of Europe’s great pastry chefs, he has presided over everything from serious competitions to baking challenges on *MasterChef Italia*. He once made a cake for David Bowie. Just saying.

“People want to see tradition blossoming again,” he explains. Apart from a lavish array of fancy cakes, Massari has reworked Brescian specialties such as *persicata* (sugar-coated peach jellies) and *bossolà*, a ring-shaped yeast cake. At Christmas, customers flock there for his panettone. “We sell around 800 a day in the season,” he says, with no hint of false modesty. From beside the cash register, he pulls out a drawer crowded with gold medals – 54 at last count.

In keeping with Italian breakfast tradition, I’m served a cappuccino and brioche. The pastry is Massari’s famous *veneziana*, an airy crumbed bun with a light but luxurious custard. The secret, I’m told, is 12,000 rotations a minute in a special machine.

After breakfast, it’s back to the city centre for that pre-lunch *pirlo*. The tavern is Osteria al Bianchi (32 Via Gasparo da Salò;

osteriaalbianchi.it), another local landmark dating back to the late 1800s. Sipping my (rather potent) aperitivo at the bar, I graze on tiny meatballs – the customary *with-pirlo* snack. Inside, lunch starts with fat, buttery spinach and breadcrumb balls (like giant *gnocchi*) or *casoncelli* – both with butter and sage. Main course is salt cod or *fettine di cavallo marinata*: slices of horsemeat cooked in red wine. It’s another local delicacy and – don’t hate me – delicious.

Afternoons here, as in any Italian town or city, are sleepy, empty-street affairs. If not at Al Bianchi, well-dressed Brescians might linger over meat-filled *casoncelli* and snails – or maybe just antipasti, local cheeses and cured meats – at the sweetly cave-like Osteria la Grotta (10 Vicolo del Prezzemolo; osterialagrotta.it). An artier crowd opts for pasta, salads and burgers with a craft beer or next-gen local wine, at Bar Torre d’Ercole, in a tiny piazza under a medieval tower (29b Via Carlo Cattaneo).

Brescia is full of pretty corners. The Romans, Lombards, Venetians and,

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La dolce vita: Award-winning gelateria Bedussi (right); the stone exterior of chic eatery, Nineteen



later, Mussolini's Fascists all left their mark. Centuries of contrasting architecture intertwine in a string of central squares – Loggia, Vittoria and Paolo VI – and twisting alleys. On the higher side of town, the evocative Via dei Musei leads to the beautifully restored Roman Capitolium and World Heritage-listed Santa Giulia Museum (bresciamusei.com). You can even explore the ancient waterways that still flow beneath the city centre, where flour mills and tanneries once operated (bresciaunderground.com).

Then, at around 5pm, life returns. There's window-shopping – Gucci, Max Mara



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and all the labels along Via Mazzini, Via Gramsci and Corso Palestro, as well as smaller, quirkier one-offs along the side streets. By 7pm it's aperitivo time: a high point of the day.

Join the throngs at Dolcevite (Piazza Paolo VI), Caffè del Teatro Grande (9a Corso Zanardelli), Arnold's (2 Via Arnaldo da Brescia) or anywhere in the lively Carmine area, around Contrada del Carmine. There's also Lanzani Bottega & Bistrot (41 Via Albertano da Brescia; gastronomialanzani.it), a smart bistro/deli on the way out of town that was awarded Aperitivo of the Year in 2012 and, this year, "three bottles" by the prestigious Gambero Rosso food and wine guide. The mandatory *bollicine* (bubbles from Franciacorta) come with complimentary snacks, such as beef tartare with artichokes or crumbed cod nuggets.

Dinner might be at the tranquil Osteria del Savio (1 Via Giovanni Piamarta; osteriadelsavio.com), the wine-centric Osteria i Capitelli (92 Via Fabio Filzi; osteriaicapitelli.com), in Borgo Trento, or the upscale Nineteen (19 Via Pietro Bulloni; nineteen19.it).

But do leave room for one more Italian ritual. Here, this dedicated ice-cream eater confesses, Brescia truly excels.

Some of Italy's best gelato can be found at the ultra-modern and painstakingly artisanal Bedussi (113 Via Crocifissa di Rosa; bedussi.it), winner of Gambero Rosso's 2015 café of the year. So spoiled are the Brescians for choice that the city divides along gelateria lines. "It's worse than football teams," says one local. I'll sit on the fence and recommend Bedussi; Bedont (18b Via Trento or 20a Via dei Musei); Ribera (64g Via XX Settembre; gelateriaribera.it); and Gelateria del Biondo (115 Via Vittorio Emanuele II; gelateriadalbiondo.it), which is famous for its chocolate-coated ice-cream bars.

All that's left to do before bed, in true Brescian (and Italian) tradition, is plan where to go for breakfast. That bakery on Via dei Musei, perhaps... ●



For three great places to stay in Brescia, go to travelinsider.qantas.com.au.