



Pinocchio

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“Every plate was filled with quality ingredients, some of them very special”

Italians have a certain style about them. It's in the fluid but self-possessed way they hold themselves, even when serving you in the most casual of settings. It's an instinctive finesse which lets them throw together a meal from the simplest of produce with extraordinary results. Or pack some skinny tables and stumpy stools into a kiosk space under the tramline in Ranelagh, as they have done here in Pinocchio, and draw a crowd that ranges from Italian students hovering for hours over one of the several wines by the glass and a shared antipasti plate to well-fed solicitors looking for the full monty: a platter of oysters perhaps, and *spaghetti con le vongole*, followed by *zabaglione* and washed down with a fine Amarone from the temperature-controlled cellar.

Perhaps predictably, the well-heeled locals hold more sway with the team behind this latest venture from Marco Giannantonio, Maurizio Mastrangelo and Marco Roccasalvo. Earlier this year the trio won the Permanent TSB Emerging Ethnic Entrepreneur of the Year Awards 2008 for their portfolio of businesses which include an Italian cookery school, catering company and gourmet travel company, alongside the excellent Campo di Fiori restaurant and wine bar in Bray, where Marco Roccasalvo is head chef.

The original format in the new Ranelagh eatery – that of a casual and slightly cramped winebar, deli and eatery – is already due for an overhaul. The reworked format involves fewer tables, more comfortable seating, and

an extended menu featuring some real treats (*mareviglia*, with scallops, crayfish and roe finished with asparagus, or chicken wrapped in Arnad lard and herbs served with sautéed mushrooms and a lemon butter). But patrons can still prop themselves at the bar for a light graze such as the *aperitivo* on a Friday or Saturday evening (when every glass of wine comes with a little tapas) or one of the several antipasti offerings.

We went the antipasti route, but at dinnertime: which is my excuse for the utterly indulgent quantity of food we found ourselves faced with. Every plate was filled with quality ingredients, some of them very special. *Grande misto di salumi, formaggi e verdure grigliate* (€16) spread itself over several plates; highlights included some superior artichoke a la Romagna (huge juicy hearts preserved in excellent olive oil, imported directly from a small Italian producer), Bella di Cerignola olives (fat dark green fruit with a distinctive slightly peppery flavour), slivers of braesola wrapped around fresh rocket leaves and shavings of 24-month aged Parmesan, and a soft creamy cheese flecked with red pepper.

But it was the *Gran misto di mare* (also €16) that stole the show. Mussels and clams had been pan-fried in their shells with olive oil, black pepper and a splash of white wine and lemon juice: just enough flavour to set off the saline sweetness of the shellfish, not so much as to overpower the natural flavours. Very, very good indeed. There were several tuna dishes: hot little peppadew peppers stuffed

with it; chunks of the fish cooked off in a rich cherry tomato and black olive sauce that made for great moppage; and tuna tartare with fresh tomato and lemon juice. Then there was the excellent smoked salmon and a mixed seafood salad showcasing tender octopus and squid. All of this was served with as much bread as necessary and a bottle of Cottini extra virgin olive oil.

We finished our meal with such fine, naturally sweet espresso I had two: the Caffè Moak coffee is available to buy retail (for plungers and espresso pod machines), as are the home made cookies which came complimentary. All the wines on the exclusively Italian list are available to take away at off sales prices, and there are many other little goodies on offer too: dried artisan Fusco pasta, jars of delicious-sounding sauces, compotes and jellies, and a full deli counter.

Every meal I've had in any one of Marco Roccasalvo's eateries has been a thoroughly enjoyable experience. Service is always delightful. Ingredients are top notch. And it feels utterly Italian, in an undiluted way that is still somewhat unusual on these shores. Could this be a new Dunne & Crescenci-style empire in the making? We hope so.

Aoife Carrigy

WE LOVED The authenticity and flexibility of the offering, and the sassy service
WE SPENT €61.10 for lots of food and a little wine for two