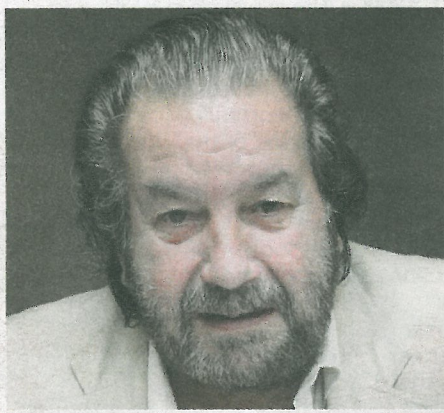


**Pinocchio**  
**Luas Kiosk,**  
**Ranelagh, Dublin 6**

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**Paolo Tullio**

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I'm often asked, "What's your favourite Italian restaurant in Ireland?" The answer that I've been giving for the past few years is Via Veneto in Ennis-corthy. The reason that I like it is that the chef/proprietor Paolo Fresilli is a proper Italian-trained chef who is determined to produce authentic Italian dishes, rather than the very common fusion cuisine that blends Irish and Italian elements.

So in Via Veneto you won't find cream in the carbonara, you won't find pasta with cream and chicken, or Hawaiian pizzas, or a whole host of other culinary mixtures that are often found in self-styled Italian restaurants.

I was talking to Paolo recently in his capacity as president of the Italian Chefs Federation in Ireland, and I mentioned that I hadn't yet found anywhere in Dublin that matched his level of authenticity.

I was surprised when he said there was a place that produced classic Italian dishes, and that he ate there himself.

I asked, "Where is it?" and he said, "I'll take you there".

So on a Tuesday night, Paolo, his partner Diana, this Paolo and his partner Marian met up in Ranelagh under the Luas station in Pinocchio.

To be perfectly honest, my first impressions were not good. From the outside, Pinocchio does not impress, but then again, it's hard to look good lodged under a train station. Inside, it's very simply decorated, almost plain; the tables and chairs are plain wood, and there's an occasional rumble as a train passes overhead.

Put together, it didn't look like a winning formula for a night's dining.

At the far right-hand end of the dining room, there's a table for four that's enclosed in a tiny room of its own, and that's where the four of us sat. Our waiter turned out to be from Molise, which is the region that borders the south of Lazio, so right from the off we had a sense of being of Italy.

Also, from this table, you get a view into



Top class: This is pure Italian cuisine

the kitchen and we were able to watch the chefs at work.

Instead of taking you through each and every dish that we ate, I'm going to single out a few and explain in detail why I thought they were so good.

Paolo had ordered a prawn dish as a starter and it came with a bowl of tomato sauce. It was made from cherry tomatoes, basil, garlic, oil, salt and pepper — a basic tomato sauce.

What set it apart from the commonplace was a finesse in the balance of those flavours. A seemingly simple sauce, but done with immense skill.

This extraordinary simplicity became the leitmotif of the evening. I'm fond of quoting

Vincent van Gogh in moments like these — "how difficult it is to be simple" — or even Leonardo da Vinci — "Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication".

It's one of those counter-intuitive truths: simplicity and pureness of form are really hard to achieve.

It makes sense when you think about it. You can hide mistakes behind a complex dish, but behind a simple one there's nowhere to hide. The fewer the ingredients, the harder it is to hide mistakes. Keeping it simple means you have to completely master the techniques.

I'd picked gnocchi with a Gorgonzola sauce for my starter. Again, a simple cream reduction sauce, but

what flavour. Coupled with perfectly cooked gnocchi, I wolfed the lot and then used bits of bread to mop up the remaining sauce.

One of the dishes Marian enjoyed in Italy this summer was the Italian way of cooking lamb chops, sometimes called *scottadito* or finger-burner. They're marinated with rosemary and grilled on a high heat. Once again, nothing complicated — you just need to get the heat and the timing exactly right.

So that's what she ordered for her main course, and found herself transported to Italy. The chops tasted exactly as they would do there.

Diana had started with a dish of mushrooms. It was a good mix of ceps, chanterelles and oyster mushrooms, but what made it a great dish was how the mushrooms had been handled. Quickly tossed on a high heat, they were crisped on the outside but still retained most of their juices. Another winning dish.

Perhaps the most iconic of the southern-Italian peasant dishes is pasta fagioli, or pasta with cannellini beans. It's a perfect mix of carbohydrates and protein and it kept the poor of Italy alive for centuries.

Basic it may be, but it can also be amazingly tasty.

Marian got this dish, served as it always was in a terracotta dish, with the addition of sausage, garlic and chilli. I kept stealing from her dish, since it was a taste of my childhood, done precisely as it always was.

The point I want to stress is that everything we ate was pure Italian cuisine: not based on it, not developed from it, not mixed with Irish recipes, just genuine Italian food, cooked as you would get it if you were to eat in Italy. That's something easily enough found in other European capitals, but in Dublin it's the exception.

For reasons I cannot fathom, even restaurants owned and run by Italians, by and large, produce food that's far from the Italian culinary canon.

After decades of not finding genuine Italian cooking in Dublin I was overjoyed to find Pinocchio. I asked to meet the chef and found a thoughtful, cultured man called Luca Mazza. He told me that when he had worked in Venice's Grand Hotel he'd got a Michelin star, which, given how well we'd eaten, came as no surprise.

It's a long way from the Grand Hotel to a restaurant under the Luas, but what they have in common is good food. We drank a bottle of a Molise wine, a huge red called Tintilia del Molise, which cost €29.50 and brought our bill to €161.60.

If you want to improve your Italian cookery skills either as a chef or as amateur, Paolo Fresilli and Luca Mazza are involved in the Italian School of Cooking — call 01 460 8800. ☐

## The verdict

FOOD 10/10

AMBIENCE 7/10

VALUE FOR MONEY 9/10

TOTAL 26/30

# Masters of SIMPLICITY