

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

■ BY MOTHER MARTHA

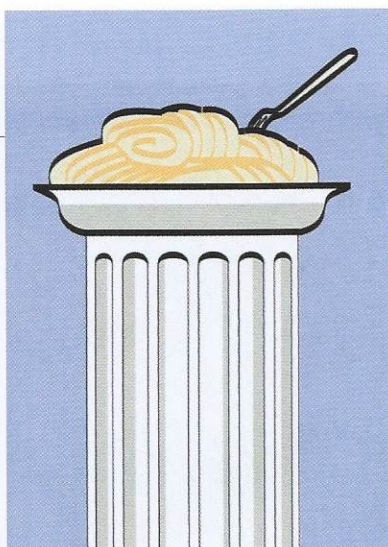
After allegedly setting fire to Rome in 64 A.D. and playing a fiddle as the city burned, the Emperor Nero decided to build himself an outrageously luxurious new palace with elaborately frescoed and gilded rooms hence called the *Domus Aurea* or “Golden House.” On its immense grounds, which had included an artificial lake, gardens, woods, and a menagerie of imported wild animals, his successor Vespasian in 72 A.D. commissioned the Colosseum, Rome’s greatest amphitheater. Later, on the Oppian Hill above (one of Rome’s seven hills, but the one everyone forgets to name) — a five-minute walk uphill from the Colosseum’s Metro (subway) stop, the Irish Dominican Church San Clemente, and the Hotel Capo d’Africa — Titus (79-81 A.D.) and Andalusian Trajan, Rome’s first foreign-born ruler (98-117 A.D.), built their baths.

Here we find the family-run, old-school, children-friendly *Hostaria Nerone*. It overlooks these majestic monuments from a shady side street which around the corner leads to the Church of St. Peter-in-Chains. (This church is home to the heavy chains that bound St. Peter, and also to Michelangelo’s enigmatic and awesome statue of Moses — is he spellbound or enraged? — intended as part of Pope Julius II’s never-completed tomb in St. Peter’s Basilica.)

Here the Abruzzese brothers, Eugenio and Enrico De Santis, along with their sister Adele (who oversees the kitchen) and Enrico’s wife Adelaide, have provided excellent home cooking and warm hospitality since 1965.

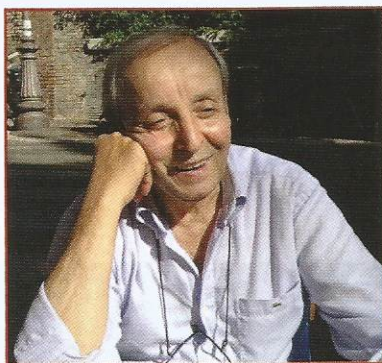
In post-World War II Rome until the turn of the 21st century, most of the *trattorie* were owned and run by Abruzzese families who’d abandoned the countryside for the big city. Times have changed with sushi being the rage, *pizzaioli* from Egypt not Naples, and “cooks” from Bangladesh, even including three at “Hostaria Nerone,” headed for the past three years by Rana.

Recommended in Rick Steve’s *Rome Guide* and favorably reviewed more than once in the *New York Times* by food writer and professional guide Maureen Fant, the translator of Italian food



Stefano Navarini illustration

HOSTARIA NERONE A FAMILY-RUN OASIS ABOVE THE COLOSSEUM



historian Orietta Zanini de Vita’s entertaining and informative volume *Popes, Peasants and Shepherds: Recipes and Lore from Rome and Lazio* (University of California Press, 2013), it’s a convenient lunch stop (but open in the evenings as well) after visiting the Colosseum or the Roman Forum.

Originally an *osteria* (tavern), this reasonably-priced corner *trattoria* is not fancy: just two small wood-paneled rooms with an appealing antipasto buffet — easily a meal in itself — at the center. Nonetheless, this friendly unpretentious place is always jammed (hence the inside tables can be cramped) with neighborhood regulars and bespectacled professors from Rome University’s nearby engineering school. In good weather there are numerous more spaciouly placed tables outside, but its special post-World War II interior, a kind of time machine, could have been the set for Ettore Scola’s movie, *La Cena* (The Supper) (1998) about an evening at a neighborhood Italian *trattoria*, with each regular client telling his or her life story. It stars Fanny Ardant, Vittorio Gassman, Giancarlo Giannini, and Stefania Sandrelli.

“When in Rome, eat like a Roman” applies to *Hostaria Nerone*. The house specialties include classically Roman innards (the *rigatoni alla pajata* or short pasta with unweaned calf’s intestines, tripe and braised oxtail with celery are to-die-for), *baccalà in umido* or codfish stewed with tomato, *carciofi alla romana* or bell-shaped artichokes Roman-style, grilled vegetables, *spaghetti alla carbonara*, *gnocchi* (on Thursdays), and *fettucine alla Nerone* (with mushrooms, peas, ham, and salami in a whipped-egg sauce), but don’t miss the succulent roast lamb from the Abruzzi, or the tender flame-grilled king prawns and swordfish steaks on Tuesdays and Fridays, traditionally fish days in Rome. The house wine is a Frascati, but the wine list has a good choice of Italian wines. *Via delle Terme di Tito 96, tel-39-064817952. Reservations essential. Closed Sundays and the month of August.* Price range c. 15 euros (\$18) for a main course; full meal with house wine c. \$35.○

From left to right: spaghetti with clams, *baccalà in umido*, *trippa alla romana*, and the best *tiramisù* in Rome hands-down!

