

CHOICE TABLES

The Best Trattoria In Rome? Let The Debate Begin

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fried eggplant, coated in tomato sauce and melted cheese, slightly charred and wonderfully crispy. The bill for all four of us was a recession-friendly 50 euros.

Occasionally there are nights so glutinous they're best forgotten — or in this case, published for posterity. After a few hours of strolling around Pigneto and watching it kick into life, we decided we needed to go to **Pigneto Quarantuno** (Via del Pigneto, 41; 06-703-99483; www.pignetoquarantuno.it; closed Mondays). It looked so inviting with its lanterns, French jazz and black and white photography, and besides, this was for the sake of journalism. It was close to midnight and we were still full from our, um, first dinner. But one look at the bowls of spaghetti swooshing out of the kitchen — piled high with freshly grated cheese, black pepper and seared strips of pancetta — and second dinners seemed reasonable.

We ordered the focaccia radicchio e taleggio, a chewy, squishy, cheesy mound of bread accented with the bitter crunch of grilled radicchio, and tagliata di manzo, a thick steak, served salty with a wedge of lemon, medium rare and slightly charred, perfect for two hungry people or four who'd already eaten. We topped off our second dinner



with mini-cannolis stuffed with ricotta, sliced pears and chocolate shavings. (A normal dinner for two is about 30 euros.) Then, when there was nothing left to eat in Pigneto, we left.

The best trattoria in Rome — if there is one — might be **Felice a Testaccio** (Via Mastro Giorgio, 29; 39-06-574-6800; www.feliceatestaccio.com; closed Sunday dinner). Felice is a Roman institu-

tion. Tucked on an obscure block in the nontouristy neighborhood of Testaccio, Felice has been run by three generations of the same family since 1936, and neither the décor, the patrons nor the recipes have changed much since.

I was here for one reason: the tonnarelli cacio e pepe. Cacio e pepe is a uniquely Roman dish: a bowl of pasta, usually spaghetti, topped with freshly shaved pecorino Romano cheese, cracked black pepper, emulsified with pasta water and olive oil. At Felice, spaghetti is replaced by homemade tonnarelli, long, square-shaped spaghetti. I'd been dreaming about it since I booked my plane ticket. My husband and I sat at a corner table. It arrived just as I remembered, a fragrant, steaming bowl of pasta covered by a small mountain of sharp white powder. The waiter set it in front of me and tossed the whole creation together until the cheese completely melted into the pasta — warm, pungent, with a vaguely spicy bite from the black pepper cutting the gooey cheese perfectly.

We followed with a big green salad; trattoria tradition mandates the salad comes at the end of the meal as a palate cleanser. Just when neither one of us could down another bite, the waiter



mentioned the tiramisù. It had recently placed seventh in a countrywide competition by the esteemed Italian food magazine *Gambero Rosso*, he said, and the fashion designer Valentino was in this afternoon and he loved it, and it would be a shame to miss it, and would we like to try it? Well, yes we would!

We finished the creamy custard, scraping the cup of its thick, bittersweet chocolate sauce, and pried ourselves away (dinner for two is about 80 euros). Just as I do every time I leave Felice, I knew I would go home, try to recreate the meal I just had, and fail — then plan my next trip back to Rome.

