BBC

IN SEARCH OF PERFECTION

REINVENTING KITCHEN CLASSICS

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY SIMON WHEELER

HISTORY

In his book *Everything on the Table*, Colman Andrews complains that food nomenclature has degenerated into 'a hash of misnomer, a stew of garbled terminology'. The focus of his frustration was fettuccine Alfredo but he might just as easily have been talking about spaghetti Bolognese.

In Italy, spaghetti Bolognese doesn't exist. If you see it on a menu there, keep walking and keep your eyes open for a restaurant offering *ragù*, which is the Italian word for a meat-based pasta sauce. It won't necessarily be a *ragù alla Bolognese* either, especially if you're not in Bologna: each region has its own version of the dish – in Abruzzo the meat will be lamb, in Sardinia wild boar. And it won't be served with spaghetti because meat tends to fall off the thin strands and stay on the plate. The bigger surface area of a ribbon pasta such as pappardelle or fettuccine holds the sauce much better. The people of Bologna traditionally use tagliatelle.

• Tagliatelle •

'Tagliatelle is a type of Italian noodle,' the hook-handed man explained ...
Lemony Snicket, *The Carnivorous Carnival*

Although 'mullet' can refer to a fish or a fourth-division footballer's haircut, food and hair don't generally share a long-standing, intertwined tradition. None the less, tradition has it that tagliatelle was created in 1487 by a cook called Zafirano, on the occasion of the marriage of Lucrezia d'Este to Annibale Bentivoglio, son of Giovanni II, Lord of Bologna, inspired by the beautiful blonde hair of the bride.

However, just as the myth that Marco Polo discovered pasta in China and brought it back to Italy in 1295 turns out to be untrue (there's a reference to pasta in Genoa as early as 1279), so records suggest that tagliatelle pre-dates Lucrezia's locks. In the 1300s there are illustrations of tagliatelle in a health manual, and in the same century there is a list of local Emilian produce that has an entry for fermentini, which sounds a lot like what we now call tagliatelle.

• *Ragù* •

The word *ragù* comes from the French *ragoût*, meaning stew. It began life as the filling for lasagne and only later became more commonly thought of as a pasta sauce. This was the first of several metamorphoses. The original *ragù* was roughly chopped rather than minced, and contained no tomato. The addition of tomato is, once again, an example of the curious culinary exchange between Italy and America. And even now, the true *ragù alla Bolognese* is sparing with the tomato.

• Spag Bol •

Spag bol is, of course, about as far from a traditional *ragù alla Bolognese* as you can get. The name alone suggests something unappetising, and in some areas it's even referred to as 'spag bog', which captures exactly the stodgy, blob-like character of the British version. So how did the dish get so misinterpreted and messed about with? One theory is that when the first Neapolitan immigrants reached America they would often serve meat with pasta as a sign of their newfound prosperity. As their standard of living grew, meat became a commonplace part of many dishes (not least because meat in the States was far less expensive than in Italy); it might well have been added to spaghetti (by far the most popular and readily available pasta abroad) with tomatoes, and given the name of the most famous such sauce: Bolognese.

THE QUEST FOR THE BEST

• Pasta Testa •

It's easy to dismiss pasta as bulk, a carb-fest that simply provides the base to some tasty sauce, when in fact it's an integral part of the dish and one of the key tastes that will determine its character.

In short, pasta should have flavour. I was determined to track down something suitably delicious for my *ragù*. I also needed to refine my ideas about which shape was the best accompaniment for it. I decided to taste as many types as I could in order to find a top-quality producer, and then go to Italy to talk to them.

Martelli, De Cecco, Barilla, Delverde, Rummo, Pasta dello Scugnizzo, La Molisana, Rustichella d'Abruzzo, Agnesi, Cipriani, Sapori di Casa, Ivana Maroni ... I contacted a number of shops and websites and came away with pasta from many producers in all shapes and sizes: papardelle, spaghettini, bucatini, bavette, spaghetti, tagliatelle. I'd bought some fresh pasta for comparison, but I was expecting to use dried pasta in the *ragù*: it keeps its *al dente* texture better, giving the kind of body and 'bite' you need in a meat dish. (At the Fat Duck we make fresh pasta for a lobster lasagne dish, but then dry it to capture that bite.)

Back in the lab I put two large saucepans on hobs and added to each 1 litre of boiling water, 10 grams of salt and 100 grams of pasta. 1:10:100 – the golden ratio of pasta cookery, providing enough water to rehydrate the pasta and dilute the starch that escapes from it, and enough salt to reinforce the 'bite'. Ten or so minutes later, the pasta testing began.

I was almost disappointed that the first two pastas out of the pots were so good. It always makes testing more difficult when the benchmark is set early on. Nevertheless, I felt already that these were the ones to beat. I'd had a hunch before we started that an egg pasta might capture what I had in mind, and these had an eggy note that I really liked (though Chris complained that it reminded him more of a Chinese stir-fry, which just goes to show that one man's perfection is another man's poison). The texture, too, was excellent: firm and chewy but not too dense.

None of the next four were likely to knock these off the top spot. The texture was all right, but there was no taste. I could happily have eaten a bowlful of one of the first two on its

own. These four, on the other hand, would need to be smothered with sauce to give any kind of interest at all.

The next two were from smaller producers La Pasta di Aldo and Rustichella di Abruzzo. They looked right and, more importantly, they *felt* right.

I mean this literally. Some mass-market producers put out a reasonably tasty pasta, especially given their high levels of output, but they none the less have to cut corners – and that shows in the finished product. Using soft flour instead of semi-milled 'semolina'; adding hot water to it rather than cold; quick-drying the strands with hot air – all of these practices bulk profit margins but reduce quality. Originally pasta was dried in the open air and then extruded through bronze dies, which gave it a special texture that held the sauce perfectly. Now major producers tend to use nylon or Teflon dies that create a surface too smooth for sauce. The two pastas I had in front of me had a roughness, a glass-paper texture that suggested care had been taken in their preparation. I expected something special, and I got it: cooking produced pasta with a richness and a big mouthfeel.

Though we sampled many more pastas throughout the afternoon, none approached the quality of these two. La Pasta di Aldo, in particular, captured the opposites that characterise great pasta – good body but with a lightness; a rich flavour that doesn't overpower; substance twinned with a delicacy – and the colour was fantastic: a vivid yolk-yellow that signalled a high egg content and the use of durum wheat semolina, the hard flour that is vital to good pasta. It was clear that my next trip to Italy would have to include a visit to Monte San Giusto to see if Luigi Donnari would let me in on how he created it.

• History and *Osterie* •

Even though spaghetti Bolognese doesn't exist in Italy, and forms of *ragù* can be found throughout the country, Bologna still seemed the best place to start my search for the perfect recipe. Besides, according to Claudia Roden, the people of the region 'eat more, care more and talk more about food than anyone else in Italy'. So much so that Bologna has become known as '*la grassa e la dotta*' (the fat and the learned) and earned a reputation as the food capital of the country. I was going to the source for my sauce.

Appropriately enough, in the land of the *Rinascimento*, my trip took shape around the kind of dualities you might find in Renaissance art: old and new; conservative and modern; private and public; traditional and iconoclastic. The journey proved to be a real inspiration – a glimpse into Italy's preservation of its culinary past, and how that might play a part in its future.

That journey began among the medieval and Renaissance splendours of Bologna's expansive main squares, Piazza Maggiore and Piazza del Nettuno, dominated by the imposing bulk of the Palazzo Re Enzo. The palace is a fantasy of battlements and buttresses, galleries and crenellations, as though it has sprung straight out of a fairy tale (though perhaps one by the Brothers Grimm: it is named after a king who was imprisoned there for the last thirty-five years of his life). Each town I visited in Italy had a *centro storico* of similarly breathtaking beauty: it's easy to believe

this has an effect on the outlook of the inhabitants, and it's easy to see how the gravitational tug of tradition might be strong in a place where you could take your morning coffee – as Bolognese all around me were doing amid the vaulted roofs and stone porticoes that lined the piazzas – surrounded by some of mankind's finest achievements.

The porticoes seemed to invite a slower pace. Here there was none of the hurried chaos of Naples; instead, well-heeled people strolled, hunched into their overcoats. It felt relaxed and ordered, tranquil. I'd swapped dingy, impossibly narrow alleyways shrouded by washing for open piazzas with fountains and wide vistas; I'd forsaken the south for the north – and with the drop in heat a different outlook prevailed: somehow less Mediterranean, more European. It would be interesting to see how this dramatic contrast expressed itself in their cuisine.

• Trad *Ragù* •

The Antica Trattoria della Gigina doesn't nestle among the elegant stone columns of Bologna. It's on a busy intersection on the road to Ferrara and is situated among the usual businesses of suburbs everywhere: sofa showrooms, brightly lit hair salons and anonymous-looking banks. Step inside, however, and you return to old-style grandeur. In the front room there is a framed set of witty and faintly carnal tarot illustrations. Along the pale orange walls are elaborately carved mahogany dressers, upon which I noticed bottles of Ardoino extra virgin olive oil (a good sign: it's used by many of the best chefs in Italy). Beneath extravagant, cascading chandeliers, waiters in ankle-length white aprons and natty grey pinstripe waistcoats hurried between tables. Downstairs, the wine cellar looked more like the library of a well-to-do bibliophile: hundreds of bottles sat in ordered rows in floor-to-ceiling dark wooden glass-fronted cabinets, with placards to indicate their provenance: *Sardegna*, *Campania*, *Sicilia*, *Calabria*. I could see the labels of some of the great wines of Italy: Barbaresco from Gaja, Ornellaia, Sassicaia, among others.

At the entrance to the restaurant was a heavy marble-topped counter with an ancient, fantastically ornate brass cash register. Above this were two photographs of stocky, serious-faced, dark-haired women in striped shirts and white aprons. One was stirring a large saucepan; the other looked impassively at a big plate of pasta. They were Gigina Bargelesi and her daughter-in-law, Arduina, the founding deities of the trattoria over fifty years ago, and it's their recipe for *ragù* that chef Carlo Cortesi cooks to this day.

In the kitchen one section was devoted to pasta-making. On an L-shaped wooden work surface a woman smoothed and stretched pasta dough with a four-foot-long rolling pin before hanging it on the slatted bars of a drying rack. She worked with a speed and confidence born of experience, and soon several large, bright yellow ovals of dough hung above her head, looking more like washing hung out to dry than the basis of many of Carlo's dishes. When I asked him what pasta he'd be serving in the restaurant he told me that the choice was dictated by who was at work in the pasta section. 'Some varieties aren't on the menu today because the woman who makes them isn't here.' This shows how seriously pasta is treated in Italy, and how specialised a job it is. Only an expert will do.

As if to confirm this, there was a little window set into one wall of the kitchen, through which customers in the restaurant could see the pasta-maker, hard at work in her blue overall and white apron (she could have stepped out of one of the photographs behind the cash till), and appraise the sheets of pasta drying above her. It is as though the pasta is so important, the

diners need the reassurance of seeing it with their own eyes: if the pasta is OK, then the rest of the meal will be too.

That Carlo's *ragù* is traditional is beyond doubt: here was a recipe genuinely handed down the generations. Yet his version contained as many surprises as any other I encountered. It brought home to me again that authenticity and perfection are elusive: even a dish of long provenance, with a city of origin attached to its name, tended to evolve into as many variations as there were imaginative chefs to make them. Carlo made a *soffritto*, as I expected, sautéing onion, celery and carrot to flavour the sauce; then he put beef and cured pork in the pan. But, unlike most Italian recipes I had come across, he added no stock or milk, only a little wine and some tomato purée. The *ragù* was allowed to fry for a couple of hours, by which time the oil was flavoured by the *soffritto*. That was the keynote of Carlo's approach: a long, slow shallow fry rather than a liquid simmer. When the *ragù* was ready, he spooned a small amount on to the tagliatelle but left it unmixed. I'd expected to see the two tossed together, so the pasta could absorb some of the sauce's flavour. I asked him why he kept the two separate, and the reply was: 'That's how it's done.'

I guess there are some parts of tradition that remain sacrosanct.

As Carlo brought the *ragù* to the table, I could see that he had regained his customary ebullience. There had been a period during the afternoon when this had deserted him. I could understand this. Cooking and filming make awkward bedfellows: as a chef you want your creations


Tagliatelle
Pappardelle
Filini
Chitarrine
Farrine
Saracene
Tagliatelle con tartufo

to be seen at their best. All too often what sits on a plate looking perfect has sagged into something unrecognisable by the time the cameras are trained upon it. The rhythms and energy of the kitchen falter before the demands of the lens – the shots repeated ad infinitum, the slow-paced chess game of manipulating everybody into position. Throughout this series of trips I was amazed at the willingness of people to give up their time for relatively little reward, and at their generosity, even when their patience was stretched to the limit.

'This is going to be my first taste of genuine Italian *ragù*,' I said to camera before digging in. It looked very appetising – the deep yellow of the pasta perfectly offset the rich red of the *ragù* – an almost shameful reminder of how insipid and unappealing the classic Brit Bolognese is, with its wan spaghetti and faded brown mince. The fried approach made for quite a dry sauce, taking it in an unusual direction (I'd have to weigh up whether I preferred a wet or dry sauce, and which one would genuinely tap into most people's notion of the essential character of *ragù*), but the oil gave it a deliciously nutty flavour that I really appreciated.

• Nu *Ragù* •

We arrived at Osteria Francescana in Modena four hours late, but Massimo Bottura was waiting and ready to go.

Massimo is one of the cleverest and most inventive chefs in Italy. One strand of his cooking might be called 'deconstruction': reducing a dish to the most minimal form of its essential elements. (Later, we'd be treated to an extraordinary example of this.) His cuisine is witty, allusive and playful, demonstrating an iconoclasm that is sometimes ill-received: the flipside of Italy's stalwart adherence to tradition in cooking (which gives it strength and character) is a deep-rooted resistance to radical change. There are times when Massimo's restaurant has been almost empty (fortunately his well-deserved two-star status has changed that), and there have been fist fights between customers over some of his creations and their provocativeness. If anyone could offer me some eye-popping ideas about *ragù*, Massimo could.

Bouncing along with a barely restrained energy, he led us away from the restaurant through a courtyard, up wide stone steps and across a gallery to his test kitchen. Here, instead of photographs of venerable female chefs hard at work, the walls were covered in modern art. A vast canvas with trowelled smears of oil paint vied for attention with an equally monumental picture of what looked like an apartment block drawn in a kind of crazed pencil scribble. Beyond the Persian rugs and a 1950s Coca-Cola dispenser was an enigmatic photograph of grassland at night, illuminated only by a faint and slightly sinister blue glow.

Art was obviously a central source of inspiration for Massimo: his conversation was peppered with analogies from artists and their ideas or the movements they established. (A first edition of the futurist Marinetti's *La Cucina Futurista* lay on the table next to the eggs and flour for our session.) Perhaps coming at food from an artistic angle is what fuels his idiosyncratic approach. 'I was born here in Modena. It can be a very blinkered town, thinking only along straight lines,' he said. 'The people are often quite conservative. They just come in and ask for pasta, tortellini. That's why I want to shake it up a little. Do crazy things.' Above Massimo's head an old neon sign flashed out 'Rock 'n' Roll', as though underlining what he was saying.

It seems to me that, in some ways, it's easier to explore culinary innovation in Britain precisely because we have no strong food tradition to enchain us. Massimo agreed: 'In Italy, everybody is a football coach – and a food critic!' At the same time, Massimo knows that to break the

rules you first have to understand them. 'Before his blue period and cubism, Picasso learned how to draw and paint like an angel. To arrive at the point where you can change things, you first have to know the tradition. Otherwise you're just a silly boy,' he said. 'But I can show you this better by cooking than talking. Let's get in the kitchen.'

Like any chef with a restless imagination, Massimo is constantly changing and evolving his dishes. Before showing me the *ragù alla Bolognese* that he serves now, he showed me his version from three years ago – a version so deconstructed that any innocent customer who ordered it expecting a plateful of tagliatelle and meat sauce would have been seriously nonplussed.

He began by rubbing the surface of a frying pan with fat from a pig's cheek, then popped in two small squares of pasta that he'd pressed together. 'This is just a suggestion of pasta. When I was a kid I used to steal pasta from my grandmother and cook it like this. It's a big memory for me.' He took a hen embryo and blanched it in a mixture of chicken and beef broth before sucking out the yolk with a syringe and replacing it with concentrated essence of *ragù*. 'And that's it! Bolognese,' Massimo finished with a flourish as he placed the embryo on the pasta.

It was a brilliant piece of theatre – the finished dish looked like a child's toy or an architectural model: a flat square plane with a sphere on top – but it was more than that; it had all the elements we associate with Bolognese but in a different form. It's the sort of food that makes you think about what you're eating, how it is constructed, how it works, how it might be made different – and that's fascinating. True food for thought. I could see how Massimo's passion for art might have informed this dish, because in some ways you had to decode it like you would a painting, thinking about its possibilities and intentions until you'd 'got' it. Of course, you could enjoy the dish without thinking about it at all – it was unquestionably delicious – but if you did think, it could add an extra dimension to the pleasure of the meal (especially if you were an Italian who had maybe pinched pasta and fried it in this way, making the food a kind of keyhole through which to glimpse old memories; food often has such powers of allusion).

Massimo, however, was already moving on. 'That was my *ragù* in 2002, but now I've gone more back to the roots. Sometimes you have to go one step back to go three forwards.' He was still using the hen embryos, this time to make tagliatelle. 'In the Emilia Romagna region people expect a strong-tasting pasta. It has to be rich and crunchy, so you need these.' As he pierced one the liquid pooled a rich red colour, like cream of tomato soup. I tasted it and the flavour was incredible. Massimo added five embryos and two egg yolks to 500 grams of '00' flour and started to knead 'as my grandmother taught me. Memory is one of the major parts of my cooking. People say I'm an experimentalist when in fact I'm just a romantic. Nostalgia plays a great part in this *ragù*.'

Making pasta requires patience. Massimo worked the dough until smooth then let it sit for forty-five minutes before flattening it out with a long pasta pin. 'The pasta needs to be rough so that it absorbs the flavour. When I'm eating *ragù* I like to feel the rough edges on my tongue. It shows that the food comes from the heart, that love and care have gone into making it,' he said. The pasta was left again, this time to dry, after which he rolled it into a long loose tubular shape, so that it looked like an oversized enchilada, and made thin slices across it, then unfurled these immediately to make sure the cut strips didn't stick. For cooking, it's best if the tagliatelle is a little bit dry. By the time we'd finished preparing the sauce, it would be ready.

'For me,' said Massimo, 'the most important thing in cooking is the idea. Then pick the ingredients and think about the best way to use them as a route to the idea. And then think about the architecture – the colours, the aesthetic. So, the ingredients ...'

He made a *soffritto* with finely chopped celery, onions and garlic. Garlic had turned out to be a source of controversy on this trip. Several chefs, including Carlo at Gigina's, had declared it had no place in a true *ragù*, though they generally couldn't tell me why, or resorted to an adamant, 'That's not how it's done.' For Massimo garlic was 'something nice to smell and taste. So why not?' Why not indeed? Once again I was confronted with how personal the idea of perfection is – and how crazy it was to try to pin it down, even though I was picking up lots of ideas in the process. 'The *soffritto* is the major flavour of the *ragù*,' Massimo continued. He added wine to it for a touch of acidity and then combined it with the meat.

'I always look for the best ingredients. The meat is 36-month-old, free-range, grass-fed Chianina, the white Tuscan cow that you see in a lot of Renaissance paintings. I use the *braghetta*, the "skirt" from the belly, which is very, very tasty. I used to use veal but now I've found the Chianina I've switched.'

The meat was mixed in a bowl then put in a vacuum bag along with bay leaves, marrowbone, tomatoes, pork ribs, beef stock and *fleur de sel* before going in the oven. 'I want the *ragù* to be really strong so I use no milk or cream.'

The choice of a vac bag was encouraging because I'd been contemplating using one myself (it's one of the ways we braise meat at the Hind's Head), but I had wondered whether using shredded rather than minced meat would take a Bolognese too far in the wrong direction, giving it an unfamiliar texture that altered appreciation of it.

The bag went in the oven for a long, slow cook. Fortunately, like a *Blue Peter* presenter, Massimo produced one he'd prepared earlier. He removed the bones and chopped it up before putting it in a pan and adding some cooked tagliatelle. There was a pause while the pasta absorbed the sauce, and then it was ready.

You could see how good the tagliatelle was even before eating it. There was almost no juice left in the pan – it had all been absorbed by the pasta. If you held up a strand the meat clung to it, promising a particularly delicious union of the ingredients. It was a promise that was kept: the meat was an enticing, light brown colour and had a grainy, chunky texture. You could still see the bits of tomato in it – there was a roughness that added interest. There was also a richness, a real mixture of flavours that developed and grew as you chewed. As for the tagliatelle, it was silky smooth from the liquid it had absorbed, and it had a taste that stood up to the meat and genuinely complemented it. Though this was in many ways a more traditional *ragù alla Bolognese* than Massimo's 2002 version, it was equally fine. He really had taken one step back to go three steps forwards.

Massimo's *ragù* had given me a lot to think about, but I was equally taken with his insistence on the role memory and nostalgia played in food, because it reflected something of what I was trying to explore at the Fat Duck, and something that I already felt needed to be incorporated into the eight dishes I was going to cook for this project. All eight tapped into a deep well of nostalgia and memory. Most of them were comfort foods, the food of childhood, and everyone's view of them was overlaid by a sense of personal history – perhaps eating pizza for the first time as a kid on a holiday abroad, or digging into a plate of steaming mash and succulent sausages while winter raged outside the windows. I needed not only to cook these as well as I possibly could, but also to capture that nostalgia, to bring to each dish the kind of trigger that would transport people back to their cherished memories of that food.

How to achieve that? I guess you could say I had a lot on my plate ...

• Tag Team •

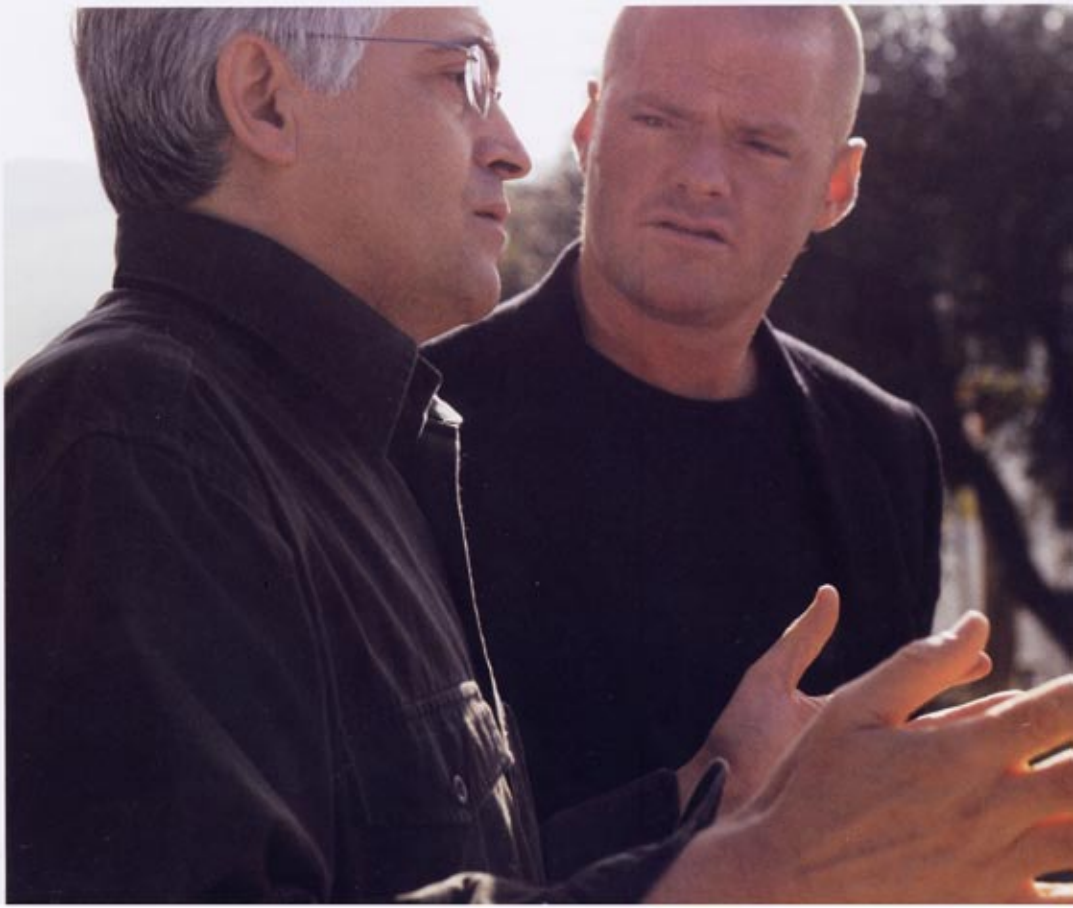
Travelling south, towards Rome, the landscape began to change. The director was playing DJ and, as *Funk & Drive* scudded out of the car's speakers, we whizzed down wide plains, past hills crowned with crumbling *palazzi*. Eventually we left the motorway and began to climb the winding road to Monte San Giusto, home to La Pasta di Aldo – the pasta that had outstripped all the others in our testing.

We pulled in by a nondescript block of flats, in front of what looked like a bungalow. This was an area where people worked hard for a living. Small plots of vines and olive trees dotted the valley amid the usual farm paraphernalia: rusting tractors, jagged sheets of corrugated metal. Each property had its guard dog, and barks and birdsong filled the air.

Luigi Donnari was waiting for us on the gravel in front of the bungalow, which turned out to be where he created his extraordinary pasta – a real cottage industry! With his sober shirt and rimless glasses Luigi had the air of a university professor, but his enthusiasm for pasta was anything but academic. Get him talking on his favourite subject and the words tumbled out.

'This is not something I do for money. During the day I work for a shoemaking company so that I have the funds for my passion – the making of pasta. Come and see.'

It's true that Luigi's not in it for the money. He could have expanded his operation but he's determined not to compromise on quality. He has scoured the country for machines that will make perfect pasta. More often than not this means tracking down older models geared towards excellence rather than speed. A bigger output would require more such machinery, and that



requires a long-term commitment on the part of the wholesale buyers of his pasta.

We stepped through the row of plastic strips dangling across the doorway and entered Luigi's 'factory'. It was on a completely different scale from anything else I had encountered during my travels: four small rooms contained the entire process, from mixing to boxing-up. It was the workplace of a real artisan. As sun slanted into the preparation room, picking out the vibrant yellow-orange glow of strips of tagliatelle hung up to dry, Luigi explained his methods.

'You need egg whites to help the texture of the dough, egg yolks for the taste and colour.' As we talked, Luigi's wife Maria poured these into a mixer not much larger than a domestic version. 'For every 100 grams of whole eggs, 25 grams of yolks. Then add semolina – 100 per cent durum wheat semolina, not the "00" flour you often use in Britain. One kilogram for every 500 grams of eggs. The semolina helps to give the pasta its golden colour.'

In the mixer, the churning dough had taken on a wonderful bright yellow hue. And the durum wheat would give the pasta that coarser, almost sandy texture that confers character and helps bind the sauce. I had a hunch that the size of the semolina was important, that if it were too small the starch granules would be damaged and lead to an unresponsive dough. Luigi agreed that the mix of grain was crucial.

'Each type of pasta needs a different mixture of durum wheat to hold its shape. Take the wide flat strips of pappardelle. Their size means they need a longer cooking time, and so they have to be strong. For pappardelle I use only 80 per cent Italian durum wheat. The rest comes from abroad, from wheat with a higher gluten content. I read somewhere that the Chinese call gluten "the muscle of flour". Add it to water and the gluten proteins bond together and make a tensile elastic mass.'

By now the dough was ready. It had started off in the mixer looking like a clump of yellow rags, but by the time it was taken out it looked and felt more like a giant lump of Play-Doh. Maria took a big chunk and cut it into squares using a two-handled blade.

'So far we have been trying to keep the pasta light,' Luigi explained. 'We try to do this until it reaches the plate. It should retain an "emptiness" so that it takes up the sauce.' He held up the dough. It had little holes, dents and craters in it. 'If we press out these holes, the pasta won't have that lightness. As we shape and roll it we have to be extremely careful to keep the air pockets in the dough – just as you would if making puff pastry.'

Maria took a square of dough larger and thicker than a phone directory and fed it repeatedly into the rollers. Each time it emerged longer and more compact than the last. She began to fold the dough between each roll, as though folding a sheet. There was a confident rhythm to her movements – *fold over, feed through, fold over, feed through* – and she narrowed the gap between the rollers as she went, until eventually the dough had transformed from directory to table runner.

Maria folded this in a sort of concertina – over and back on itself, dusting semolina on each time – until she had a fat square once more; she then halved it, flattened out the two pieces and spliced them together. Finally it was judged to be the right thickness, with enough air trapped in the folds. The dough was ready to be cut into its shape.

The cutting machine was automated but not much bigger than the hand-cranked stainless steel models people have at home. The long thin sheet of dough was fed into the top and came out of the bottom in a row of flat strips, like the fringes on a cowboy's jacket. Maria put a thin metal rod under the dangling fringe and lifted it up and over to a wheeled, double-rowed, four-tiered metal rack. The rod fitted niftily into grooves in the rack. When the rack was full Maria


Electrolux

simply trundled it next door and into the drying chamber, heaved shut the doors, flicked a few switches, and a vigorous turbine hum kicked in.

I wanted to know how much importance Luigi attached to the drying process. 'It's a fundamental part,' he replied. 'If the drying goes wrong, you ruin all the care you've put into making the pasta in the first place.'

The drying process removes moisture from the pasta. I wondered how far this governed its ability to suck up a sauce. Luigi explained that, rather than laying the pasta flat to dry – as others do – he hangs it up. 'This is the most important thing. It keeps it porous. My pasta is so porous that, if you leave it near cheese, it'll absorb the smell!'

'Why is hanging the pasta to dry better than laying it flat?'

'The crucial factor is the air that circulates around the pasta, which allows the moisture to be released *gradually*. It must be not too quick, not too slow. It's a delicate balance.'

'I've heard some people say you should start the drying with a high temperature, to fix the colour and the proteins, and then reduce the heat.'

'Hmm, I'm still experimenting.' Luigi peered at me, a little owlishly, through his spectacles. 'But so far for me the long time, low temp works well.'

It worked well for me too. Luigi made the most textured pasta I'd ever felt: it was speckled with semolina and almost like bark to the touch. That and its superb colour made it really enticing, something you'd want to cook and eat as soon as you caught sight of it, which is surely one benchmark of perfect food.

It was already late afternoon. The road – and the director's headsplitting collection of CDs – awaited. But Luigi was determined that we have lunch with him. It was an offer I couldn't refuse. I knew that, this being Italy, the meal would be turned into an event; and, given Luigi's sympathy and flair, he would make this something special. I wasn't wrong. We sat down with all his family – sons and daughters, aunts and grandmother – to a banquet: prosciutto, olives stuffed with meat, refreshing local white wine and a syrupy warmed red, and of course his unbelievable pasta, simply dressed with lemon and parsley – all prepared by a young chef from the nearby catering school who wore a tall white chef's hat. The cuts of meat came from Luigi's own animals; the olive oil was home-made. It was hard to believe that he found the time to do all this, and work for a shoemaker, and produce perhaps the finest pasta in Italy. Perfection requires this kind of dedication and devotion, and Luigi was a real inspiration.