



Top: wildly inventive Ponte Rosso chef Massimo Ratti's tortellini stuffed with artichoke and sprinkled with coconut on a fagiolini, or raspberry purée, dissected by a line of ground coffee beans; bottom: 2014 Bologna Disfida champion Dario Picchiotti of Antica Trattoria Sacerno, just outside the city, and his tortellini in smoked sauce



# Tempest in a Tortellino

In Bologna, a quintet of chefs is challenging centuries of home-grown orthodoxy about how the little filled pasta should be made. The results, as **GARY WALTHER** reports, are delicious and sometimes entertaining

Photographs by **KIM ÖHRLING**



*Bologna's picturesque  
Piazza Santo Stefano*





A stroll underneath one of the city's iconic porticos

I was ready for the world, the world wasn't ready for me," declaims Massimo Ratti, chef-owner of Ponte Rosso Restaurant in Monteveglio, just south of Bologna, as he settles his mountainous frame into a chair.

In Bologna, the Vatican of tortellini (as it likes to think – Modena would differ), Ratti is a heretic. Here, the small, ring-shaped pasta is freighted with centuries of tradition: it was first mentioned in a manuscript in 1300, according to Giancarlo Roversi, co-author of *On the Majesty of Tortellini*. There's also an "official" tortellini recipe that resides in the Bologna Chamber of Commerce, and tortellini comes with its own creation myth: legend has it that an innkeeper in Castelfranco, 24 kilometres northwest of Bologna, invented it, inspired by the bellybutton of Venus.

Ponte Rosso's menu seems to thumb its nose at all that. Ratti is notorious for pasta with fruit, and in particular, for his tortellini with strawberry sauce slashed with a runway of brewed coffee grounds. Mario Ferrara, the chef at Scaccomatto ("checkmate" in English) in the historic centre, tells me, with some admiration, "He's a little mad."

But then, Ferrara is known for his tortellini in a lemongrass-and-cheese

sauce, which he entered this year in the "Creativi" category of Bologna's Disfida, the city's two-year-old tortellini Mondiale, held in early February. There's also Francesco Carboni of Acqua Pazza, who won the 2015 competition in the Creativi category for his tortellini filled with stingray, mozzarella, anchovies and zest of Sorrento lemons. Tortellini traditionalists might find this revolting (fish and cheese?), but does it constitute a revolt? Yes and no – like Italy itself – and that's what is interesting about these rebels.

This trio, and their compatriots, Dario Picchiotti of Antica Trattoria Sacerno, who won this year's Disfida Creativi for tortellini in a smoked broth, and Alessandro Panichi of Ristorante Sotto l'Arco, are taking the revered dish way out of bounds in terms of what goes over and under the tortellini. But only Carboni has dared tinker with the tortellini fundament, the traditional filling (or *ripieno*) of pork loin, mortadella, prosciutto, Parmigiano Reggiano and nutmeg. (Even Ratti's strawberry tortellini filling is classic.)

In Bologna, fiddling with the *ripieno* is treason. Here, tradition sculpts creativity – none of these chefs wants to overthrow the *ancien regime*. But it's also their fluency in the tradition that enables them to riff so delectably. "To work on the tortellino has been fairly hard for me," says Panichi, "due to the fact it is taken very seriously, being the symbol of the town itself and loved by locals. I wanted to pay full respect to the tradition."

His *tortellino ne brodo ne panna* expresses this perfectly by declaring what it is not – neither tortellini in capon broth nor tortellini in cream, the two traditional baths, but a combination. "Cream is not broadly accepted, so it is risky as a start," he says. "The idea is to enrich the [traditional capon] broth resulting in a creamy sauce."

Instead of reciting a manifesto of creativity, Carboni says "I don't know" when I ask for the inspiration behind his stingray tortellini. He reverts to the restaurant's speciality, fish, a rarity in Bologna, and to technique and ingredients. Stingray doesn't resist »

## TORTELLINI AT HOME



Place roughly half a teaspoon of filling onto a flattened, square piece of dough (about 6 to 7 centimeters per side)



Coat two corners with water, then fold the square into a triangle – but keep the top edges slightly short of the bottom ones



Make sure the edges are sealed so that the tortellini holds its shape when immersed in the *brodo*



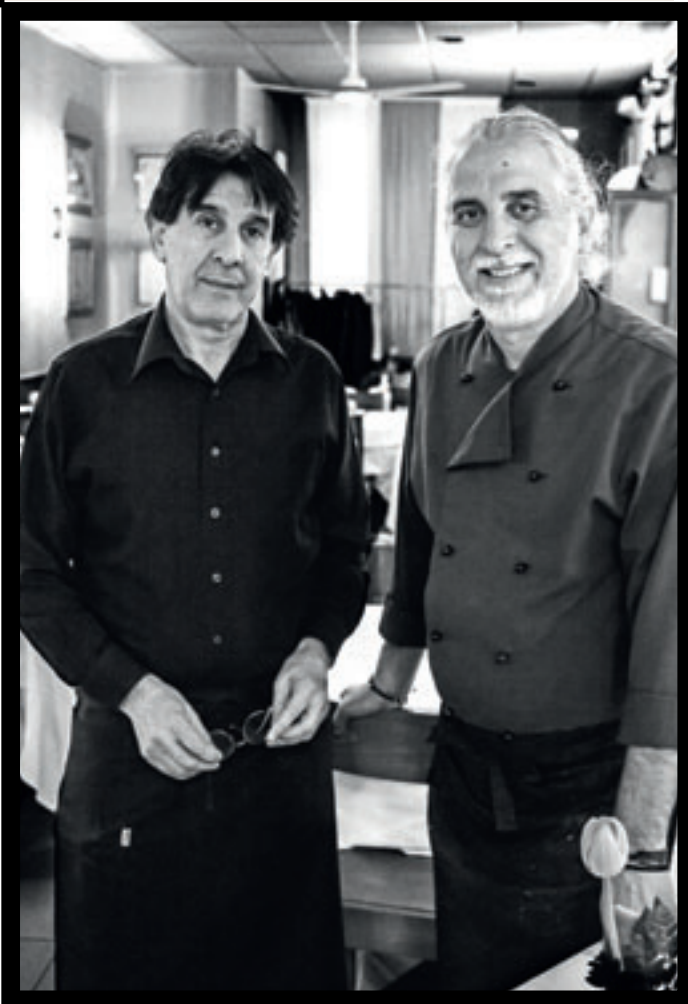
Drape the corners over your index finger, as if a ring



Fold the upper corner of the triangle slightly backwards



Pronto!



Top: tortellini enthusiast – and innovator – Alessandro Panichi mans the kitchen at Ristorante Sotto l'Arco. With its cream-and-broth sauce, Panichi's tortellini ne brodo ne panna is part tradition, part something entirely new; bottom: tortellini in parmesan cream, spiced with lemongrass and ginger created by Scaccomatto chef Mario Ferrara (right), shown here with his brother Enzo, the maître d'





Left: a charming alley with a view of the vertiginous Asinelli Tower; below: reigning Bologna *Disfida* champ Francesco Carboni of seafood restaurant *Acqua Pazza*



## FOR THE FIRST 15 YEARS, IF A GUEST ASKED FOR CLASSIC TORTELLINI IN BRODO, RATTI SENT THEM DOWN THE STREET

cooking in broth and it has a long aftertaste, so it's a good partner to the other ingredients. The perfectly al dente mini-broccoli florets on top, he says, are "for the look". (The stingray filling makes it perfect for a *ripasso*, is my own heretical thought.)

Picchiotti says that he wanted to marry the traditional *ripieno* to a smoked taste, "which is unusual in Italian cuisine". Then he adds, "I wanted to give my tortellino an international dress for this recipe."

The genial Ferrara, who is from Basilicata, the arch of the Italian boot, says that he was "searching for a fresh taste in the mouth" when he decided on ginger and lemongrass for his dish. Ferrara's tortellini is a little casket of provocative tastes. "It's a very American tortellini," as someone at the table behind me said, which I consider an homage, even if it wasn't meant as such. (At Scaccomatto, it

is an off-menu item — *fuori carta* is the key phrase — so ask about it when you book, as a noted Italian food critic at the table in front of me had.) The pasta here, no matter the form, is excellent — handmade, on some days by Mario's mother.

Ponte Rosso shows the odd fissures of the *creativo* movement best. Ratti is a knight errant and he revels in the role. "There were many times when the dining room was empty," he says. Violet tortellini, which he made with blueberries (and has since given up), "scared people".

For the first 15 years, if a guest asked for classic tortellini in *brodo*, he sent them down the street. His mother and father criticised him severely; his father cried. Over the years he has won accolades for his creativity, and perhaps that has allowed him to soften his stance: now he makes the traditional version of the dish upon request.

There's a deep respect for traditional Italian cuisine that suffuses all the dishes: Ratti thinks that chefs should "be creative within the classical tradition". He doesn't stint on ingredients — the Parmigiano Reggiano in the strawberry tortellini filling is aged for 36 months — and the dish itself, which I thought would be a novelty item, is excellent. The strawberry sauce is subtle, a light nap of fruit, but the astounding thing is that it's the aged coffee grounds that provide the kicker.

Don't take my word for it. I polled a table of 10 Italians who ordered the dish. One didn't like the presentation, inquiring "Did someone pour coffee on this by mistake?" Another said it "was akin to a hijacked airliner". But the other eight raised their hands to say "*mi piace*." Massimo, Bologna has found its appetite for you — and for your creative compatriots. ♦



Acqua Pazza chef  
Carboni's award-winning  
tortellini stuffed with  
stingray, mozzarella,  
anchovies and zest of  
Sorrento lemons



## BOLOGNA'S TORTELLINI REBELS

1

**Antica Trattoria Sacerno**

Via di mezzo Levante 2/b 40012,  
Sacerno di Calderara di Reno;  
+39 051 6469050; [sacerno.it](http://sacerno.it)

2

**Acqua Pazza**

Via Augusto Murri 168, Bologna;  
+39 051443422,  
[acquapazzabologna.it](http://acquapazzabologna.it)

3

**Ristorante Sotto l'Arco**

Via Aretusi 5, Bologna; +39 051  
6199848; [villa-aretusi.it](http://villa-aretusi.it)

4

**Ponte Rosso Restaurant**

Via Dei Ponti 16, Monteveglio;  
+39 051 6702166;  
[ristoranteponterosso.com](http://ristoranteponterosso.com)

5

**Ristorante Scaccomatto**

Via Broccaindosso 63/b,  
Bologna; +39 051 263404;  
[ristorantescaccomatto.com](http://ristorantescaccomatto.com)