

MODICA'S LA GAZZA LADRA

By Caroline Phillips



If there were a handful of Michelin restaurants in the Sicilian town of Modica and its immediate environs, that would be impressive. But there are actually two handfuls. Several eateries that are Michelin-rated, plus a couple with two stars, and a duo with one star. That's just plain greedy when there are entire cities starving for just one Michelin restaurant.

But it doesn't stop there. Modica is also one of the most beautiful and unspoilt towns in Sicily. Ravaged by the 1693 earthquake, it was mostly rebuilt in Sicilian Baroque style. So en route to La Gazza Ladra restaurant, I gorge on aesthetic delights. I wander through 'higher' and 'lower' Modica – which are connected by enough antique stone steps to reach heaven – working up an appetite for any five-or-nine-course taster menu.

I try to get into the black, calorifically speaking, by working out on the town's Baroque Stairmasters, tearing up to the beautiful Cathedral San Giorgio, doing squats along arms-width-wide alleys dotted with Vespas, and stretching my arms up towards all its religious statues. In a place like this, a shrine to food, frankly the statues should be of Sicilian black pigs (a local delicacy), carob and Modica chocolate puddings.



When I arrive at the restaurant, I'm hungry enough to eat a statue or two. It's in the 19th-century Palazzo Failla – now a hotel. La Gazza Ladra is named after the Rossini opera, *The Thieving Magpie*, and takes its magpie theme seriously. The décor is all black and white: inside there are white tablecloths and black chairs; outside there are black chairs and white tablecloths. There's not much point in any thieving as it's a little on the stark side. That much said, if I were a

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Maggie, I'd steal one of the waiters – they're so sparkingly charming, knowledgeable and attentive without being over-solicitous. I imagine my husband might nick the wine cellar – all 800 labels, with a selection of major Italian and European wines and reportedly some from extraordinarily good, small, local producers.

Legend (or at any rate, Wikipedia) has it that during the time of composing the opera of La Gazza Ladra, the producer assured its completion by locking Rossini in a room, from the window of which the composer threw out the sheets of music. It's not clear whether they locked Chef David Tamburini in the kitchen. But the end result is the same. A meal of operatic intensity and artistic merit that appeals to all the senses (except perhaps hearing – but you can go to the opera for that).



The food is Sicilian and from other areas of Italy, a modern twist on traditional – and it is refined, original (or at least, imaginatively reinvented), delicate, elegant, natural, seasonal, uses typical Sicilian produce and traditions, artisanal...oooh, I could go on. Plus it's almost too pretty to eat. If I hadn't been ready to wolf down a statue of black-skinned Sicilian pig, I would have hung my (full) dinner plate on the wall (as a homage to the chef and Leonardo da Vinci, who were born in the same town.)

I should really tell you in Italian what sort of delicious things they offer, and you can Google Translate it yourself. It's a huge menu and I'm tempted to start with the Meringa a vapore, mousse di cioccolato amara genovese alla cenere, because that's what I want to eat first in case I don't have room for it at the end (I don't, on either count).



In between, the chef sends amuse-bouches (that's French) of finger-sized parmesan-stuffed fried aubergine and Patata e polipo (that's Italian; and they're pretty potato 'nests' of octopus salad, green olive sauce and foodie foam). I eat delicious veal carpaccio like little sushi 'logs' scattered with black truffle 'leaves'. My husband devours lemon and scampi linguine with almond 'cheese' and then scorpion fish, both eliciting from him bedroom-type sounds.

My only sadness is that the restaurant is far from humming with punters – such is the problem of being surrounded by stiff competition. In fact, there are only two other occupied tables. In August. I am not always a fan of Michelin-starred restaurants, with their prissy nod to Parisian-style fine dining and the haute-bourgeoisie, and their too flouncy approaches – from using a particular kind of glassware and crockery to giving you a new napkin when you return from the lavatory. But this restaurant hits the spot for me. And how!

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