

EATING OUT Maria Pia's Trattoria

Bringing her country to town



David Burton

FOR all its richness and diversity, the regional cuisine of Puglia — the heel of the boot that is the map of Italy — remains curiously ignored by the rest of the outside world.

Setting matters right is Wellington's own Maria Pia de Razza Klein. Having returned to her native Puglia and gathered material from elderly people about their traditional foodways, Pia last week completed her first book, a memoir interwoven with recipes which is now awaiting publication.

In the meantime, Wellingtonians can enjoy an actual taste of Puglia at Pia's own celebrated trattoria in Thorndon, which she runs with her husband, *maitre d'* Richard Klein.

All good restaurateurs create a tiny parallel universe of their own, and to dine at Maria Pia's is to escape for a few hours into the cocoon of the Italian nonna you never had.

Without trying too hard, and by emphatically avoiding clumsy symbolism such as murals and tricolour flags, the interior exudes the design sense for which Italians are justifiably famous.

The main dining area is dominated by a long banquette in burgundy leather, and the wooden furniture is closely though not exactly matched. There are framed classical engravings and much family memorabilia, for this is a sophisticated take on a neighbourhood "Ma and Pa" trattoria.

Burning wood in the open fireplace affords a welcoming sense of rusticity and domestic cosiness, as do bowls of quinces and apples laid out on side tables along with freshly picked wild birch boletes.

(Asked where on earth Pia found them growing in Wellington, Klein quipped "Don't you know? You never ask a mushroom gatherer to reveal her source.")

Above all, the Italian atmosphere derives from the mingled aromas of beautiful food, rigorously traditional and regional in style — yet often startlingly unfamiliar.

"Eggs with mussels sounds strange," remarked our Italian waiter Luigi, "but when you are eating it, it is really good".

And so it was: green-lipped mussels (a substitute for the small black mussels of Italy) had been steamed open and filled with a mixture of lightly scrambled egg, fresh mint, a hint of pecorino, and a squeeze of lemon to complement the sharpness of the cheese. The recipe derives from Pia's father and will feature in her book.

What Pia calls the New Zealand link in the dish is the bottle of Waha Wero kiwifruit and habanero sauce (from Kaitiaki Fire) which is offered as an optional condiment.

More importantly, she is fusing a local element into her kitchen by training young New Zealand chefs: Phillip Dellow makes the restaurant's lovely sourdough spelt bread, while Lucas Tock, who has been with Pia for nearly two years, is now entrusted to make the fresh pasta.

Orecchiette alla Lecce — "little ears" pas-



Family ties: To dine at Maria Pia's is to escape for a few hours into the cocoon of the Italian nonna you never had.

ta with buffalo mozzarella and red chilli from the picturesque Puglian city of Lecce — were delicious, and made all the more authentic by the addition of Wairarapa-grown cima di rapa, an Italian green vegetable similar in flavour to the Chinese choy sum which Pia was forced to use as a substitute till recently.

As the French chef Ferdinand Point wrote, success is the sum of little things done well, and in order to get the true Pugliese taste she was seeking in her house olive oil, Pia now imports it privately from her uncle who lives in Ugento.

A number of the Italian wines on the list are also exclusive to Maria Pia's. A wonderfully rounded, mouth-filling Verdicchio Pleno Umani Ronchi 2001 completely alters the common perception of verdicchio as being frivolous and thin.

A good selection of well-priced, full-flavoured, weighty primitivo reds (the ancestor of California's zinfandel) serves to underline Italy's little-known treasure trove of indiginous

THE NITTY GRITTY

MARIA PIA'S TRATTORIA

Where: 55-57 Mulgrave St,
Thorndon

Ph: 499 5590

Licence: full

Price range of mains:

\$25.90-\$26.90

Food: ★★★★★

Service: ★★★★★

Ambience: ★★★★★

Wine list: ★★★★★

Cost: \$91 for two

(excluding wine)

varieties, in a land where viticulture has existed since the Phoenicians.

Though Klein and Pia are thinking of going all out and creating a full Pugliese menu, for now it is partially eclectic, with specials such as the modern version of vitello tonnato, in which the veal is smothered with a creamy mayonnaise enriched with tuna and anchovies, and dotted with chopped capers.

Wellingtonians may have missed the point of the authentic and necessarily expensive Thai food served at the late lamented Anise, but thankfully, appear to have taken to Maria Pia's: the overflow of customers will be accommodated in a new annex nearing completion in what was formerly the back garden, which smells invitingly of the Canadian pine used in its construction.

I have never been able to fully fathom why anybody born and raised in modern Italy would want to leave, but the Klein family are fully settled here now, and Wellington is all the richer for their presence.