

## FOOD FOR THE SOUL

*If Italian food was a classic suit, it would look like the dishes at Scalini, whose taste and texture evoke an unabashed classicism that is both charming and satisfying.*

by **matt pomroy**

There's an idea of Italian food as the "food of the soul", and it's something that's been lost in recent years. We lost it amid a rush to modernise and change. It was usurped by restaurants with "concepts" that need explaining to you, food being served on things other than plates, waiters in trainers addressing the table with an over-friendly "hi guys" and the general tampering with what has – for many decades – been the way we've enjoyed experiencing a high-end restaurant. Well, Scalini is that old-style restaurant, just as it used to be.

It's another import – this time from London – but it feels more like it was imported from the Eighties. The fact that Scalini is resolutely fixed in the past is not a gimmick in itself, it's just that they've always been like this and at no point thought to change.

It first opened in Chelsea, near to the back of Harrods, in 1988, which doesn't sound particularly long ago, but high-end Italian restaurants came to the UK late on. As recently as 1975 the British were being reeled in by April Fool's clips of Italian farmers bringing in the annual spaghetti harvest, so La Dolce Vita – at least in terms of decent restaurants – is fairly recent thing in Britain.

Scalini went on to be hugely influential in the rise of Italian trattorias throughout the UK and a fixture in the English capital and what we have in Dubai is a menu of greatest hits, golden oldies and timeless classics.

The burrata was uncommon in Dubai a decade ago but now seems to be ubiquitous to the point where it's a fair measure of comparison between restaurants in the city. Here it's as good as anywhere and, unlike many places, the portions are so generous a third of it required boxing up to take home for later.

Meanwhile the carpaccio alla rucola, with its thin slivers of raw beef and topping of rucola and little curled shavings of Parmesan is an Italian classic and here they do it admirably. Invented in 1950 at Harry's Bar in Venice it's now a staple of good Italian restaurants the world over.

The owners here say the Dubai branch is all "inspired by memories spent by the sea" and according the décor is light, with marine-blue interiors, terracotta tiles and magnolia washed walls. There's not a melting candle in a bottle in sight, so while the food is traditional the setting avoids the clichés of lesser establishments. This is actually a nice place to sit and spend an evening and is more

akin to the places along the Italian Riviera than in the big cities. The plastic-coated menu, however, did seem something of a misstep, given that the setting and tone was one of a more casual elegance than café, but largely everything here feels right.

Accordingly, the options for mains lean towards seafood, with a spaghetti lobster (lobster wrapped in spaghetti), risotto di mare and, our choice, the grilled langoustines all on offer. Opened up and coated in butter, the langoustines were one of those moreish but simple dishes that prove you don't need to overcomplicated things on the plate. The side of green beans was enough to offset the richness.

Likewise, the homemade tagliatelle with truffle was a simple as you're going to find on any menu in the city, but Italian is often best when it consists of basic things done well and a little truffle is all you need to elevate a dish into something you would make at home.

Desserts read like a manifesto of summer living in Italy. And while the pistachio panna cotta and a tiramisu all can be found elsewhere in Dubai, it was the banana flambés that took me back to being a young teen on holiday in Italy – longer of hair, shorter of trouser back then, but this flambé tasted just how I remembered it. It won't win awards, but it will win over diners looking for something familiar from their youth.

The general manager, Roberto Roberti – perhaps the most Italian name ever – says that Scalini is "more than a restaurant, it's a showcase of the very best that Italy has to offer – the cuisine, the character, fused together with an authentic charm" and while you might be pushing it to say the "best" it really is a lovely place to dine for the evening.

While The Artisan probably still stands the best fine-dining Italian in the city, this is its more laid-back, old-fashioned cousin who lives on the coast. Italian food from the past, which is not to say that it's dated, but just something that hasn't been tampered with or modernised or given a needless concept. Nothing reinvented or reinterpreted, just the hits in generous portions.

Meanwhile, upstairs is the Turkish steakhouse Nusr Et, which is better known for its gimmicky "Salt Bae" and his salt-flinging antics, but downstairs here at Scalini there's no need for gimmicks, no need to be cutting-edge or innovative, because when you're cooking Italian food it's usually best to not mess with magic. 🍷

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