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THE ITALIAN JOB

The new crew rethinking Australia's favourite food

ITALY RULES AT OCTOBER'S WORLD CHEF SHOWCASE:
Sardinian Michelin star • Best pizza maker • Italy's number one chef



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New spin on pizza, pasta

As the Italian-themed World Chef Showcase is unveiled, **Scott Bolles** reports on Sydney's new-generation Italian chefs.

It's a brave man who picks on an Italian nonna. It is an even braver one who takes a shot at all of them. But that's exactly what Italian chef Davide Scabin did on his recent visit to Australia. The owner of the radical Combal Zero restaurant, near Turin, says nonnas – or their rigid traditions at least – are holding Italy back from a Spanish-style leap in gastronomy.

"Until we get rid of them, we can't move our cooking forward," he says. Distil Scabin's idea and its essence provides the starting point for one of the great debates of Sydney's Italian restaurant scene.

In one corner you have the nonna-loving traditionalists, in the other those not afraid to push a few boundaries: the next generation of Sydney Italian.

Cronulla is an unlikely setting for an Italian food revolution. But it is here – in the post-*Puberty Blues* era of Chiko Rolls – that chef Danny Russo is turning out modern Italian at The Old Library. Already known for his "deconstructed" vitello tonnato, Russo has added caprese marshmallow to his repertoire. Take the ingredients of a caprese salad, whisk it up with buffalo milk mozzarella, roll it in basil seeds and you have a dish that might bring a smile to Scabin's dial.

Likewise, among the moored luxury craft of the north shore's upper-middle classes, Alessandro Pavoni is pushing the Italian food boat out at Ormeeggio at The Spit. Pavoni has surrounded himself with progressive chefs with a mountain of experience at Michelin restaurants to play with Italian food. His latest creation grew from one of his favourite combinations.

"I wanted to take champagne and oysters and get that idea into a risotto," he says. "First I cooked the risotto using a local [Italian] champagne and put freshly shucked

oyster on top. Then I [evolved] the dish by using oyster water and parsnip puree and a little lemon rind. It isn't a dish you'd have in Italy."

Pavoni fastidiously researches new techniques and uses sous-vide and rehydration to create dishes such as his version of baccala alla vicentina. Gelatin is used, the mixture is put in a cream gun and the moussey result – with a sprinkling of lemon dust – might put a conservative nonna into therapy.

John Wilson is an unusual poster child for traditional Italian. His anglo complexion conceals his inner Giovanni. He's a hard-and-fast stickler for Italian tradition with a deeply researched knowledge.

"I just want it to taste the way it is supposed to taste," says the owner of the restaurant at Carriageworks and

1HERSAT 0006 recently appointed creative director at Maurice Terzini's Icebergs restaurant. "Are you reinventing to satisfy your ego or are you doing it for your customer? I think it is Gen Y. When I was 25, it was the classics. This modern movement has bypassed the classics."

Pavoni is unapologetic: "What I'm doing is pretty scary.

"Cooking traditional food isn't easy but it is safe. I'm looking to use those traditional ingredients in a playful way. Sometimes Italian is too much tradition. You have to have a sound base in tradition then develop new technique."

Wilson argues many of the shortcomings of Italian food – beyond modern Italian – in Sydney could be easily fixed.

He takes a stab at what he believes are widespread problems.

"The initial mistake is using a lot of ingredients in a superfluous way," he says. "There's the problem with too much parmesan, the use of olive oil. And what's with those pepper grinders? In Italy, pepper is used in such a sparing way."

Despite the strict convictions of his boss, David Lovett, who is head chef at Wilson's restaurant, John and Peter Canteen at CarriageWorks, has found some wriggle room. Together they've explored dishes, breaking them down and rebuilding them.

"We're kindred spirits in that we both love the classics," Lovett says. "But the cassata doesn't use ricotta

like Sicilians do. Using marscapone instead makes it richer and smoother. And there's a dish of roast chicken, white polenta and burnt sage butter. You won't find those three ingredients together in Italy. You might find it with a game bird, but it works really well with the chicken."

The chef and co-owner at Honeycomb, Andy Bunn, is another to bring a new take to Italian food.

"My oxtail pasta is influenced by my French training," he says.

"I marinate it in red wine and red-wine vinegar. And I slow-braise with a red-wine reduction. The Italians would probably just pop it in the oven with ingredients.

"I also use freshly grated horseradish and pickled beetroot – which is an English thing."

The changing face of Italian food is obvious in Sydney. In Darlinghurst, Thai chef Ekkachia Lek-ieng is in the kitchen at Buffalo Dining Club. Its co-owner, Italian-Australian Michael Fantuz, says the young chef started in the kitchen at another restaurant he owns.

"He has very delicate hands, which is great with a product like buffalo mozzarella," he says.

James Kidman earned his stripes as head chef at Otto before leaving to work in Canberra. Kidman, who is moving back to Sydney later this year, argues one of the main stumbling blocks with Italian is its presentation. "Traditional Italian cooking doesn't concern itself with form," he says. "If this is addressed properly, like Alessandro is doing at Ormeeggio, it still enables the flavour of the food to sing. That's where you can meet old with new."

A founding member of the Taste of Young Sydney collective, Mitch Orr, landed in the kitchen at Buzo in Woollahra earlier this year. A tattooed wild-child from the cutting-edge TOYS cooking Italian? "The majority of my training was in Italian kitchens," Orr says. "I just really love making pasta."

To that end, Orr has been cooking six-course pasta degustation meals for Buzo customers. The long-term plan is a pasta eatery, a joint venture between Orr and the Buzo partners.

"You need to think outside the box. We've served spaghetti with sea urchin, shaved mushrooms and



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bitter chocolate," Orr says.

"Italian kitchens are very multicultural places. At Pilu I worked with a lot of Japanese guys. You don't have to be Italian to cook Italian."

'I'm looking to use traditional ingredients in a playful way.'

Alessandro Pavoni

Pushing the Italian boundaries

Buffalo Dining Club, 116 Surrey Street, Sydney, 9332 4052.

Buzo, 3 Jersey Road, Woollahra, 9328 1600.

Honeycomb, 354 Liverpool Street, Darlinghurst, 9331 3387.

John and Peter Canteen at

Carriageworks, 245 Wilson Street, Eveleigh, 8571 9004.

The Old Library, 15 Surf Road, Cronulla, 9544 5360.

Ormeccio at The Spit, d'Albora Marinas, The Spit, Mosman, 9969 4088.



The vanguard ... (clockwise from main) Alessandro Pavoni, from Ormeccio at The Spit; cassata from John and Peter Canteen at CarriageWorks, and the restaurant's chef, David Lovett; Pavoni's oyster risotto "isn't a dish you'd have in Italy". Photos: Marco Del Grande, Petrina Tinsley, Sahlan Hayes