



FEATURE

FEBRUARY 25, 2009

## TRY THE AUTHENTIC RISOTTO ALLA MILANESE AT OTTO

A STAPLE in the Asian diet, rice is not a dish you normally see on the menu of a fine-dining Western restaurant. But if Michele Pavanello has his way, diners here will soon go to OTTO Ristorante to try his Risotto alla Milanese. From March to April, Pavanello is offering a free dessert with and a 50-per-cent discount on every order of Risotto alla Milanese (\$32).

“When I was a little boy living on a farm, my father would make the most fantastic risotto, often mixing it up with herbs and spices found in our backyard,” Pavanello reminisces fondly. “And the Risotto alla Milanese is the most basic of all risotto dishes.

“It’s just rice with one spice. It’s very simple, but it’s very tasty – if done right.”

Beginning last year, the Virtual Group of Italian Chefs (GVCI), a global network that promotes authentic Italian cuisine and frowns upon bad imitations, started to honour a dish every year – the first was Spaghetti Carbonara. In 2009, the buzz is all about the saffron risotto. In participating restaurants, chefs celebrate the dish by making it according to GVCI’s published recipe. OTTO is one of three restaurants in Singapore among thousands worldwide that honour this mission.

Pavanello only joined the Italian restaurant at red dot Traffic as resident chef in early February, but he is determined to promote the Risotto alla Milanese, his favourite comfort food, in a bid to “say no to bogus Italian food”. This is especially since his mentor and OTTO’s Executive Chef Giacomo Gallina is the vice-president of GVCI. Gallina is currently touring the US as an ambassador for the GVCI and to promote the 2009 dish.

Like all great Italian dishes, Risotto alla Milanese is endemic to a region and born in the Po Valley in Lombardia. A great symbol of the city of Milan, the saffron risotto is usually prepared plain or with the



ossobucco. Pavanello says that no matter where you eat it, the dish should taste the same as that in Italy. “To me, (the GVCI mission) is a way for true Italian cuisine to expand all over the world.”

The authentic recipe for the Risotto alla Milanese was taken from an old cookbook of a well-known chef in Italy called Pellegrino Artusi. Although the recipe is simple and straightforward, any Italian food aficionado would know that a good risotto is a tall order for any restaurant, let alone the plain Milanese dish that’s cooked with just one spice and extremely difficult to “dress up”.

Italian rice has always been boiled in water or in other liquids and aromatised with different substances, but the true revolution was “toasting” it in translucent onion and then little by little adding broth and, once done, enriching it with saffron and giving it a creamy texture with the mantecatura of butter and cheese.

Those who have patronised Pavanello’s former restaurants, Pontini and Il Lido, will more often than not rank his risotto dishes one of the best here.

So, why is it so difficult to achieve a good risotto?

“It depends on the chef,” the Treviso native says. “It’s the little tweaks, your taste buds; the little things you do here and there... For example, I use sea salt, but somebody else might use fine salt.”

Pavanello says creativity and precision is what makeS the difference. “For me, I think the difference is going the extra mile to get all the right ingredients to complete one dish,” the 41-year-old says.

Citing the example of Gualtiero Marchesi, one of the first chefs in Italy to get a Michelin star, Pavanello said Marchesi made a splash with his Risotto alla Milanese by “using a black dish, so that you see the risotto laid thinly on the plate with a 24-carat gold leaf on top.”

Why does Pavanello love the Risotto alla Milanese?

“It’s what I love about every dish. It’s simplicity,” he says. “I must be able to taste everything. You have to taste the saffron, but it has to be subtle enough for you to taste the rest – the rice, the cheese and the butter. You need the whole spectrum.

“What more can you want when you have a good risotto?”

#### **MICHELE’S RECIPE (serves 4)**

##### **INGREDIENTS**

- 320 gm Vialone or Carnaroli rice
- 80 gm unsalted butter
- 20 ml extra virgin olive oil
- 1 litre Broth (made out of beef or beef and chicken meat or veal meat, keep it light in colour but full on flavour; hold back on the salt)
- 1 teaspoon of saffron threads
- 1 small white onion, chopped very fine
- 80gm grated Grana Padano or Parmigiano Reggiano



##### **STEPS**

- Slowly panfry at very low heat the chopped onion until translucent, making sure the onion does not get dark, and keep it aside.
- Add half of the butter in the saucepan, make sure it’s not too hot or your butter will burn, add the rice and toast it at medium heat and always keep mixing with the wooden spoon.
- When the rice is well-toasted, add the cooked onion and stir well.
- Now start the cooking by adding ladle by ladle the broth to about 1cm over level of rice level and keep mixing. Add the saffron threads.
- Continue this exercise until the rice is al dente and remove the saucepan from the heat. Allow the rice to melt.
- By now, the rice should have a runny consistence (all’onda) and ready for the “mantecatura”. This operation will give the risotto a creamy but still-light consistence, so add the remaining butter and the freshly grated cheese and stir well until the butter is all melted and the cheese is incorporated into the risotto.
- Season with salt and pepper.
- Put the saucepan back over low heat and add more stock until a smooth texture is achieved.
- Serve the rice in a hot flat plate. In Italy, we eat risotto with the fork.



R I S T O R A N T E

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### **ABOUT OTTO RISTORANTE**

OTTO Ristorante offers authentic Italian cuisine in an atmosphere of warm Italian hospitality. Nestled in a cosy corner in the Red Dot Traffic Building, OTTO is right in the heart of town amid an eclectic group of artists, business executives, fashionistas and expatriates. Helmed by prolific chefs Giacomo Gallina and Michele Pavanello, OTTO promises to deliver the freshest ingredients with a fresh take on tradition.