

# No choice can be the right choice for a

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I like set menus. I particularly like them when there's only one set of food available and the restaurant has been doing it forever.

The only choice at one of my favourite places in the world, **La Chaumière** on the Grand Corniche near Nice, is between beef and lamb — or chicken, which has to be ordered in advance. It's all grilled on the open fire. It's fantastic. Of course, there's a lot of pre and post main course stuff too.

The **Locanda dell'Isola Comacina**, on an island in Lake Como, has been doing the same set menu since 1947. I guess they must have got it right by now.

The current owner is Benvenuto Puricelli. I had a blazing row with him when I first visited 10 years ago. I didn't like the table he offered, or his attitude. I wanted to eat outside. He said they weren't serving outside. So I stormed off in a tantrum. Benvenuto followed me, we made up, he gave me a lovely exterior table and Vanessa and I had a marvellous meal.

Benvenuto phones me from time to time when he comes to London. He greeted me on my daily walk up the beach in Barbados last Christmas. He was staying a few hotels away from Sandy Lane.

I recently visited the Comacina for the second time. Benvenuto had reserved a perfect table overlooking the pine covered hills and the tiny lakeside village of Masala.

You can only get to Comacina by boat. There's a ferry from Masala or you come, as Geraldine and I did, while travelling on Lake Como.

## WINNER'S DINNERS

Benvenuto explained, "A man who was a fascist, a captain under Mussolini, ran to this island to hide and then opened the restaurant." Benvenuto's had it for a very long time. He wears tartan for some complex reason, which he explained and I instantly forgot.

At the end of the meal he rings a cowbell to get attention, then tells the story of the island. This was in Italian so it meant nothing to me!

The food is fantastic. The setting, totally historic. We started with an enormous bread roll and tomato with a piece of lemon on top. Then a vegetable selection — celery, courgette, tomato, zucchini, carrots, beans, chicory. All superb.

Then an enormous prosciutto ham either from Praga or called Praga. I know it was Praga something or other. Also dried beef bresaola. Then an incredible dish which I've never had before. A whole onion baked, so it turns out sweet. That is delicious. Plus warm beetroot. Followed by fresh trout grilled over charcoal.

Then free-range chicken open and crushed and fried in an iron pot with oil and served with salad. Then from an enormous block, some parmigiano reggiano cheese followed by a dessert of oranges sliced at the table with an ice cream called *fior di vaniglia*. Ending with cabaret and coffee. It's all very touristic. But it works.

We stumbled on another delightful lakeside place, the **Nilus**

bar in Varenna. Giovanni Melesi has owned it for 16 years.

You sit right by the water on the edge of a pretty and totally unspoilt village. There are boats bobbing about, little clouds over the mountains opposite. It's idyllic. Flowers in urns everywhere. As it must have been in the 1930s or earlier.

I had a great pizza. Geraldine had crepes with artichoke and asparagus. Then I had chocolate and walnut ice cream. You can eat posh stuff there, but why bother?

As I was dictating my views a lady from Cheshire with a rucksack came over and asked, "Is this the BBC? Are you doing a book?"

"I'm just a poor tourist on holiday," I replied.

"So I won't see you on television?" she said, disappointed.

Earlier we'd been very touristic and taken photos of George Clooney's lakeside villa. I generously offer these to Sunday Times readers at £575.38 for a 7in x 5in print. You can have the villa with me in the foreground, with Geraldine in the foreground or on its own. The price (credit cards not accepted) includes postage and packing. Hurry while stocks last.

An American, Dan McAlinden of Granada Hills, California, was first of the few to guess correctly why Marie Helvin brushed her hands against her bosoms prior to taking our photo outside Lucio.

## big cheese



Michael with Benvenuto at the Locanda dell'Isola Comacina

He e-mailed: "She palmed her breasts in order to stimulate her nipples." I think Marie believed she was to be in the photo. So she did the old actress and model trick of charging up

the nipples so they'd look better photographically.

I watched some of the most famous actresses in the world do that for decades. Well, it passes the time, doesn't it?