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# Fusion Cuisine Becomes Fad In Italy's Fashionable Milan

By ALESSANDRA GALLONI | Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

MILAN -- If you plan to catch your favorite designers, models and photographers weaving in and out of Milan's restaurant scene during next week's fashion shows, be advised. While you could once spot famous faces over your truffle tortellini and barolo, you're now likely to eat a fair share of sushi and sake. Fusion is the latest food fad here.

From breakfasts to aperitifs to the private party, chefs will be serving up concoctions of Italian dishes with East Asian flavors. Juices with ginseng and basilico will give models jump-starts for marathon days of catwalk scrutiny. Nobu's €23 (\$22.50) Bento Box lunch special with shiitake mushroom salad will provide as quick, if more expensive, a lunch as "panino con prosciutto" at the bar around the corner. Chicken satay sticks will accompany martini aperitifs. And the style maven wearing the latest Dolce & Gabbana flower applique suede boots are likely to saunter into a Tibetan-style eatery on the outskirts of the city.

Of course, Italian food hasn't fallen out of fashion. "Made in Italy" is still going strong, especially at the big three restaurants favored on the fashion circuit -- Bice, Da Giacomo, and Da Ilia, where porcini mushrooms are still being rolled out as fast as the Hermes Kelly bags file in. And few ethnic restaurants in Italy have made it on to internationally acclaimed lists such as the Michelin guide.

Still, like aficionados fussing over the must-have accessory this season, fashion folk are on the lookout for trendsetters in the restaurant business as well. GQ magazine may give the nod to the next hot spot: Insiders say that the Milan locale lucky enough to host a party for the U.S. glossy can be sure to cash in with the fashion world at least until the following season. That seems to be the case for Quattrocento and Shambala, two of the most popular fusion restaurants right now. Even if spaghetti with black algae isn't really a match made in heaven, these eateries are being frequented at a torrid pace.

Ethnic and fusion cuisine is nothing new. But Italians are so fond of their cuisine that foreign food has struggled to take hold here. Other than the €10 Chinese take-out, a few Ethiopian restaurants (Ethiopia is a former colony) and the occasional Mexican joint, there hasn't been much choice. But now Milan has become the one city in Italy to open Japanese, Thai and Indian eateries of some quality. Today, spring rolls with fried rice are likely to accompany a martini at the Hotel Sheraton Majestic Diana during the 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. cocktail hour. Tempura and sushi are part of the dinner menu at the achingly trendy Corso Como 10. Milanese chef Pietro Leeman spent two years in China and Japan before opening Joia, a top-notch nouvelle cuisine restaurant based on natural foods.

You may ask why on earth both locals and visitors to Italy -- *Italy!* -- would want to stuff themselves with anything other than tagliatelle, T-bone steak and tiramisu. The reason is simple: It's a desire for a change of pace. "We love traditional Mediterranean cuisine, but in the last few years, we've become really passionate

about Japanese food," says stylist Domenico Dolce. Mr. Dolce and partner Stefano Gabbana, whose €563 corduroy pants are all the rage now, often entertain at home in their tiger-striped motif dining room. But, for an intimate dinner out with friends, they often pop over to Japanese locales Fuji and Nobu.

Like his knack for choosing whom to dress at the next Oscars, designer [Giorgio Armani](#) bet four years ago that Italians would soon be ready to drop their pasta forks and head to the sushi bar. That's when he opened Nobu Milan, a new take on the hot eatery in New York's trendy Tribeca district. Messrs. Dolce and Gabbana go for [Chef Shane McNeill's](#) sushi dinners. Miuccia Prada likes to sit at the back of the restaurant, next to the smoked-glass wall. Gucci designer Tom Ford and Tod's head honcho Diego della Valle are regulars as well.

Mr. Armani, who understands the symbiotic relationship between food and fashion, opened Nobu next to his megastore on Via Manzoni, which also houses the whitewashed Armani Cafe. Conveniently, the 62-year-old designer lives right around the corner -- what Italians would call a case of "casa e bottega," (home and work). "I go there for dinner often but I also like dropping by for a drink before dinner because it has become one of Milan's happening places for happy hour. The atmosphere is young, hip and chic," says Mr. Armani, who doesn't even eat sushi, but loves the rock shrimp tempura with ponzu sauce.

The funny thing about the Milan eating scene is that for all the bechamel-dripping lasagna, the women in Milan wear tight jeans and tiny white tops. The secret lies in small portions: four or five bites of ravioli and you're done. At the new ethnocic restaurants, the menu is rigorously dietary.

Shambala, an old chicken farm turned Bali-esque restaurant on the outskirts of Milan, follows a no-butter rule for all its dishes, from the Thai shrimp soup with coconut sauce to the wasabi-marinated polyp salad, says the petite, 40-year-old co-owner Antonella Sequeri. Many plates are doused with tamarind, which is a laxative. No wonder Shambala can get away with serving American-sized portions. Even the finger-licking chocolate used to make their specialty "Tower of Babel" dessert -- 12 centimeters of pure cocoa enveloping "frutti di bosco" -- is "cioccolato magro" (low-fat chocolate).

That was good enough for both Donatella Versace, who hosted a party in the garden, and for Mr. Armani, who feted Ricky Martin and his friends here after dressing the "Vida Loca" Puerto Rican pop star.

Then there's Quattrocento, the newest fusion restaurant of the pack, housed in a 15th century convent about three kilometers from the city center. Here, customers lounge in chocolate-brown leather armchairs and drink from goblets while lounge music by Japanese artist Satyan wafts in the background. When Renzo Rossi hosted a party here to celebrate the opening of his new Diesel clothing store in central Milan last spring, the exclusive 50-person crowd was served miso soup and seitan cutlet.

Still, you can bet that New York's fashionistas wanting to make a "bella figura" in Milan are fast making reservations at some of the more traditional Italian establishments. Vogue Editor Anna Wintour still books her 1 p.m. lunch meeting at Bice on the chic Via Borgospesso. The 75-year-old Tuscan restaurant hardly has that intimate home-cooking feeling anymore, as it's reproduced itself 24 times around the world, including San Jose, Calif., and Chile. And the tables are so close that even Gwyneth Paltrow couldn't squeeze through without pushing a \$614 Motorola V60i cellphone off the table and onto the floor.

Dining incognito in or just outside the kitchen at the back of fancy restaurants became popular among the rich and famous during the 1970s, when terrorism gripped Italy. People didn't like to dine in the public eye for fear of being gunned down Sopranos-style while they were digging into their spaghetti. Today, kitchen dining is still de rigueur for Bice's best clients. You can call to book the kitchen table, though you may have to wait until Kate Moss and her posse clear out.

At Da Giacomo, you'll still rub shoulders with Gucci Chief Executive Domenico de Sole -- "It's great!" he gushes when asked about it -- who favors the grilled sea bass. Inside the pistachio-colored rooms of this mainly fish restaurant, you can bet the wrist bearing the €50 Swatch belongs to someone who has a €6,000 Vacheron Constantin at home. Outside, members of the fashion B-list are likely cooling their heels on line, while Tiziana Bulleri, the restaurant's tall, blonde manager and Giacomo's daughter, wafts between the spaciouly laid out tables in search of a seat.

For years, customers have enjoyed sea bass grilled, steamed, fried, tossed in pasta, baked in salt, or cooked just about any other way. Yet for all the frying pans clattering in the kitchen, the sushi influence has swept Da Giacomo as well. The restaurant now serves a wide array of marinated raw fish. "The influx of Asian cuisine has refined people's tastes," says Ms. Bulleri. "And we're adapting."

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