

## bite

ROBYN BOYLE

### Da Franco

The room rings with "buona sera" as we enter the cosy interior of this very visible restaurant with a terrace facing Kortrijk's mediaeval belfry. It's a welcome dose of Mediterranean warmth and hospitality on a stormy Sunday evening in West Flanders.

Francesco Cottone, better known as just Franco, grew up in Marsala, Sicily, in a family with six children. He and his brother Giovanni came to Belgium in 1977, where Franco got a job at the same location on the Grote Markt. Ten years later he took over the business which has been known as a standard for authentic Italian cuisine ever since.

While tempted by starters such as beef *carpaccio*, *escargots*, smoked salmon and Prosciutto di Parma, we finally opt for a capricciosa salad: a platter for two covered in leafy romaine, bitter radicchio, carrots and ham strips. Around the edges of the plate are pretty duos of tomato-mozzarella slices and basil leaves topped with hard-boiled egg. With this, our server gives us a bottle of basil-flavoured olive oil, while making that signature Italian hand-to-mouth gesture.

Fortunately, my companion and I both know that we are in the mood for pasta; otherwise, the menu could easily overwhelm. If it's pizza you're after, there are no less than 16 varieties,

from simple tomato-ey margherita to pizza Franco, a combination of tomato, mozzarella, mushroom, salami, artichoke, asparagus and oregano.

Or how about beef tenderloin, veal prepared in every way imaginable, or a classic dish like *saltimbocca* or *osso buco*. If your head's not spinning already, there are still all the seafood choices, from scampi and sole fillet to turbot, monkfish and mixed grill.

But we are resolute and order meat cannelloni and the house tortellini *au gratin*. Even the plethora of other fresh pasta options cannot sway us (although the spinach and salmon lasagne comes close).

While waiting for our mains to arrive, we fill our glasses from the half-litre of house red wine – in a quaint ceramic pitcher – and sop up virgin olive oil with fresh, crusty bread. The place is busy but nonetheless relaxed and comfortable, and there's pleasant music playing in the background; great Italian tenor Andrea Bocelli is the only artist I recognise.

Minutes later, two scorching hot dishes arrive straight out of the oven. My companion has three fat tubes of cannelloni smothered in the creamiest cheese sauce. The pasta itself is al dente, if not too much so, and its meat filling is on the runny side. Fortunately, the

abundant sauce is full of flavour and makes for a good dish on the whole.

My tortellini are lovely little packages with a dab of meat on the inside. They are perfectly cooked – toothable yet tender – and combined with a mixture of Prosciutto, heavy cream, butter and cheese that has bubbled up under the oven grill, giving the pasta a tasty golden crust.

It's strawberry season, so we set our sights on an appropriate dessert. The presentation is a work of art: a scoop each of vanilla and strawberry ice cream take centre stage, surrounded by fresh strawberries, a splash of coulis, a thin waffle cookie, whipped cream and decorative mint leaf wafers. And it tastes as fantastic as it looks.

We order a frosty glass of limoncello and an intense shot of espresso to round off the evening and suddenly find ourselves making the same hand gesture. Bellissimo!

→ [www.dafranco.be](http://www.dafranco.be)



- 📍 Grote Markt 9-10, Kortrijk; 056.21.41.95
- 🕒 Daily, 11.30-14.30 & 18.00-23.30
- € Mains: €10-€26
- ★ The full gamut of real Italian pizzas, pastas, salads, meat and fish dishes

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## THE LAST WORD

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