



# Valeria's Classroom

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**Young chefs at Da Caino are growing up in the shadow of the Gran Mère of Maremma cuisine, amid flowers and wild boars, rustic roots and delicate harmonies of flavour.**

"We had clients who would stop by in the early morning before going to the Saturnia baths to order their *tagliatelle ripassate*. They'd come back at four in the afternoon to have them reheated in the skillet. That's how much they liked them." Valeria Piccini is no longer the young bride who flanked her mother-in-law in the kitchen of the family osteria alongside her husband Maurizio.

Da Caino trattoria, thanks to that young woman's talent, has become one of the most acclaimed restaurants in the country. Two Michelin stars have sparkled for fourteen years over the sky of Montemerano, the medieval village in the Maremma Grossetana area and location of the Relais & Chateaux chain that includes Caino. But it is the echoes of an ancient past and of solid Tuscan bases that characterise the most authentic aspects of its current menu. Like the trio of classic Florentine tripe, *lampredotto* (cow's stomach) and warm tripe salad; so perfect that it could be a banner for Made in Tuscany raised around the world.

Valeria has gone forward by always looking back, with balance, wisdom and sensitivity. With the brusque manner of a red-blooded woman, she moves in the kitchen like a mother bear weaning her cubs. She blindly trusts the three youngsters (Paolo Meneguz, Alessandro Enrico Sciortino, Marco Franceschetti) who have been with her for some time, sending them proudly out into the dining room to receive compliments and applause.

The 'team', living in a village surrounded by bucolic landscapes, sheep and Etruscan ruins, has transformed into a tight family, working happily side by side. Valeria directs, offers, checks and tastes. They, respectfully and with youthful enthusiasm, suggest new directions, new solutions. She has taught them how to handle wild boar, suckling pigs and lambs with their bare hands, delivered whole and then processed in the adjoining workshop.

She has trained them to work with every kind of offal; to make bread and pasta. But she has always warned against extreme measures, "Because people want elementary things. Modern techniques result in unnatural consistencies."

You can see it in the extremely fine *tortelli* with a *fricasee* of lamb with fresh goat's milk cheese and wild rocket pesto that has a velvety and natural consistency.



"Yes, I am fortunate. They are kids that like how I cook and when they do it they reflect my own thoughts." You can also see it in the pork trotter and squid, a 2013 creation inspired by the Sicilian roots of Alessandro Enrico Sciortino. The trotters are boiled down completely and then deboned, chopped very finely, dressed with lemon rind, formed into shapes and then browned. The crunchy crust that forms is accompanied by other thin wafers, including one made with squid ink, and the light, rubbery quality of raw squid threads. The borage salad and cedar granita cleanse the mouth of the trotter's pleasing fattiness and create a coming and going, hot and cold sensation. Fineness, sensuality, cleanliness, freshness...you have no idea what small miracle a gracefully salty borage leaf can produce if it is placed where it needs to be.

Maurizio, her husband, is a supposedly difficult character, despite the celebrated ascendancy of Menichetti's Maremma brigade. He hides unexpected shades of sweetness (as a good host does) and has always understood and defended his wife's choices, proving himself to be her most faithful ally. "I have always eaten well, and I have always known that. When I was a child I used to go to the mountains with my grandfather and our snack was bread dipped in spring water with hard pecorino. I couldn't not realise my wife's talent."

He supported the changes of regime

when she tried to impose new and less appreciated cooking and new dance steps on the local clientele (those of the *tagliatelle ripassate* fame). The pigeon *carpaccio* alienated many sympathisers, not forever, but almost. It had to happen, however, and the maturity they have reached today is a milestone for who, both in the area and beyond, wants to see the future.

Valeria in the meantime is interested in the present, and anguishes over a diverse and more generally pared back clientele. The drop in tourism, even in these marvellous areas, is the reality that many must equip themselves against. Valeria has thus accepted to leave her home turf to gain (or better, to give) nourishment with a consultancy at the Winter Garden by Caino, the restaurant in Florence's St. Regis Hotel. Here she has transferred her soft Tuscan approach, her repertoire and creativity, to flank dishes by Executive Chef Michele Griglio; the unforgettable *pappardelle* with Fossa cheese, asparagus and bacon, for example, or the new minestrone with three cooking times. "For me the flavour comes from the broth, the colour from the tender baby vegetables just stewed, and the crunchiness from the raw vegetables with the Tuscan bread toast and goat's milk cheese." She goes to Florence twice a week, subjecting herself to a significant *tour de force*. She leaves Caino in the hands of the bear cubs, who are by this time autonomous.

The team is well-oiled and it shows in the dishes. "One day," says Valeria, "we were hunting for new ideas. They had just brought me some wonderful mushrooms. We were wondering what to do with them. I got the boys with me and we went for a walk in the place where the mushrooms came from. Looking around us, we noted elder, snails and wild mint...we decided to put the mushrooms in a *raviolo* and accompany them with elder and crunchy lamb sweetbreads. To go with the mushrooms we also prepared another dish, a flavoursome and clear broth (the mushrooms dried in the



oven with a little garlic, oil and salt, then placed in a pot with water) and poured over snails that had been sautéed in a pan with the wild mint. The dish was finished with bergamot wafers. I just love mushrooms, can you tell?" And the wafers too, I would add. Vali is convinced that today it should be osterias making dishes you can't find anywhere else. Like the salted stewed ham, one of her mother-in-law's recipes, "food for working in the fields".

This role, according to Valeria, has been relatively ignored in Italy. "People want gastronomic restaurants like us to do the impossible task of being two things at once: both a little trattoria and haute cuisine. It's true that some dishes aren't made anymore, but I am certainly not missing out on them! Who knows, perhaps I should open a Cainetto."

It would be a real shame, however, to renounce the profound sense of taste



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that she achieves through complexity overturned by apparent simplicity. It's something that she is particularly good at. To lighten, sweeten and make it poetic there is also the chromatic tonality of the many flowers and herbs gathered in the countryside or in the Piccini garden, just a short distance from the falls where the sulphuric waters of the Granello bubble. The olive trees here produce the Menichetti extra virgin oil, a precious addition to the kitchen. The vineyards produce the Morellino, made today by the "bandit"...

Wild pea, acacia, rocket, horseradish, mallow, borage, daisies, sorrel and burnet flowers make a multi-coloured palette that paints every dish with vivid and brilliant colours and millimetric flavours. Ice is a constant necessity in the kitchen, a basic but very effective technique. "These elements are all very delicate and it takes nothing to lose their aroma, refreshing qualities or colour." The centrifuged tomatoes with herbs are millimetric in dosage. 0.4 g of oregano, 0.5 g of mint, 1.2 of chives...if a decimal changes, the formula changes. Everything in a dish has precise balance. Everything, even the presence of aromatic herbs (200 g ricotta, 1.3 g mint), is codified "because if you don't weigh them, the smallest thing could cover a flavour. And when you get to the sensation you want, you have to maintain it by using the same quantities that brought you to that result, and the only way to do that is by weighing." Valeria, unsurprisingly, is a chemical analyst, a diploma that has been left in the drawer. "It's true, that has helped me with the precision. I know what I'm talking about," even if she has never taken alginates or methylcellulose into consideration. Chemical reactions begin in the head. And in the head flavours drum. "Things must begin spontaneously. You think, and almost automatically a dish arrives that doesn't need great adjustment." Like an Italian who now dreams in English. The goat's milk ice cream with an orange, olive oil and false Perù pepper emulsion was born from this mental alchemy, a reflection of a sweet snack: orange, oil, sugar and pepper. You can count the





flavours used on one hand, otherwise it's difficult to keep the balance, and she is always careful to never exceed a certain threshold.

Nothing is gratuitous or superfluous. Garnish is always an essential element and must serve a function. If something is not used to create balance, it has no reason to be there. Try, for example, taking away the marinated anchovy from the tomato *pici* with fish roe, or to eliminate that rice curry wafer from the sucking pig with bean cream. The sophisticated construction would not be the same. The balance in Valeria's food is actually a very elegant way to

introduce dissonance. The mild and shaded acidity (that's almost a brand name like the ricotta *semifreddo* with a celery sauce, tomato sauce and lemon confit: a dessert by the glass that's been on the menu since this summer) or the soft and voluptuous crush of invisible wafers.

For this the mounting of the dishes is laborious, requiring minuscule and imperceptible steps. The potato *tortelli*, in the simplicity of their presentation, hide a complex architecture of taste that reveals a flavour in every corner. It comes naturally to ask what role wine plays at this point (other than

being sold at the Enoteca next door), given that one of the richest and most impressive Italian cellars is located here, the pride and joy of Mr Menichetti. "No role," the good Maurizio says shortly, a provocation. "If you put the good with the good they always go well together." A tautology. No need to say he is sceptical about pairings. "You can't go wrong."

Maurizio has in fact placed a collector's cellar at his wife's disposal, so to say. It's like a set from a Dario Argento horror movie with 20,000 bottles arranged between cavernous walled tunnels in the rocky underground to a depth of 32 metres. You pass between Bordeaux and Burgundy, when up pops a 1922 Rioja, and then you drown in Champagne. Literally. During recent floods one of the corners

of the cellar where the pupitres wine racks were standing was left underwater. "We have been having meals with family and friends accompanied by bubbles for months. Some of the bottles were perfect, but who knows what producer they came from. Others tasted a bit muddy. Unfortunately, the Champagne cork shrinks and the bottles had been sitting in water and mud. We were too; our house was cut off for a few days."

Adding insult to injury, a hacker had just knocked out the restaurant server (duly reported to the judicial authorities), deleting the cellar archive where all the labels and past menus had been stored. "We are trying hard to rebuild it all." We really hope so. In the meantime, we will have a hard time forgetting the kitchen and cellar so easily.

### Da Caino

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## Pappardelle accompanied by Fossa cheese and an asparagus and bacon ragout

### For the green dough

500 g spinach  
12 eggs  
300 g semolina wheat flour  
900 g white 'type 00' flour  
salt  
extra virgin olive oil

Wash the spinach, boil it and blend with 2 of the 12 eggs until smooth. Mix with the rest of the ingredients and leave to rest in the refrigerator.

### For the classic dough

15 eggs  
400 g semolina wheat flour  
1.1 kg 'type 00' flour

Mix all the ingredients and leave to rest in the refrigerator.

### For the ragout

200 g asparagus cut into small pieces  
40 g bacon cut into strips  
1/4 fresh onion  
salt  
extra virgin olive oil

Brown the onion in a pan together with the bacon. Add the asparagus and sauté quickly. Place the ragout in a tray and cool.



### To complete the dish

8 parboiled asparagus tips  
grated Fossa pecorino cheese  
1 slice crunchy bacon

Cook the pasta in boiling water, drain and sauté with the asparagus ragout. Cover with the Fossa pecorino and place on a serving dish. Garnish with 2 asparagus tips and a slice of crunchy bacon.



## Mint snails with porcini mushroom broth and bergamot wafer

### For the porcini mushroom broth

20 porcini mushroom stalks  
1 clove garlic  
extra virgin olive oil  
salt  
water

### For the porcini mushrooms

20 porcini mushroom caps  
extra virgin olive oil  
salt

### For the bergamot wafer

100 g isomalt  
dried and finely chopped bergamot leaves

### For the breadcrumbs

150 g breadcrumbs  
30 g lard, coarsely chopped with a knife  
10 g chopped wild mint  
extra virgin olive oil

### For the snails

40 snails (boiled and shelled)  
30 g lard, coarsely chopped with a knife  
10 g chopped wild mint  
extra virgin olive oil

Clean the stalks and cut them into pieces. Place in a pan with a clove of garlic, oil and salt. Cook in the oven at 180°C until golden brown. Remove the garlic clove and place stalks in a pot, covering with water. Boil over low heat for at least 2 hours to concentrate the flavour. Drain the stalks from the broth and filter.

Slice the caps into 1 cm thick pieces, and brown in a pan. Adjust for salt.

Prepare a pan with a silpat non-stick baking sheet. Arrange the isomalt in small mounds and dust with the chopped bergamot. Cover with another silpat sheet and bake in the oven at 180°C for 5 minutes. Store in a hermetically sealed (airtight) container.

Place a drop of oil, the lard and mint in a pan. Brown and add the bread, mixing until it is toasted. Place on a sheet of absorbent paper and store in a hermetically sealed container.

Brown the lard and mint in a pan with a drop of oil. Add the snails and sauté on high heat. Transfer to a sheet of absorbent paper and keep warm.

### To complete the dish

Heat the broth. Place 6 slices of porcini mushrooms at the bottom of the dish, then lay the snails over them, covering with the bergamot wafer. Dust the wafer with the breadcrumbs. Complete the dish by pouring in the hot porcini broth.



## Maremmana heifer heart, blood orange reduction, almonds and wild herb salad

### For the Maremmana heifer heart

*1 Maremmana heifer heart*

Rinse the heart under running water. Dry and remove all sinew and excess fat. Quarter the heart to obtain 4 cubes of meat. Season with oil and salt, then sear over coals.

### For the orange reduction

*2 kg blood oranges (tarocchi oranges)*

Squeeze the oranges then strain the juice through fine gauze. Place the juice in a pot and reduce slowly over low heat, whisking if necessary. Once it has a syrupy consistency, place in a container and store in the refrigerator.

### For the almond sauce

*100 g peeled almonds  
300 g water  
2.5 g agar-agar  
salt*

Blend together the almonds and water to obtain a smooth mixture. Add the agar-agar and bring to a boil. Leave to cool. Once cold, cut the gelatine that has formed into cubes and blend again, adjusting for flavour with salt. Filter and store in the refrigerator.

### For the wild herb salad

*1 Mariano thistle heart (Milk thistle)  
toasted almonds  
4 mallow leaves  
4 borage leaves  
4 wild rocket leaves  
4 bunches wild daisies  
4 saltwort leaves  
8 pimpernel leaves  
extra virgin olive oil  
salt*

Using a mandolin cut the Mariano thistle into thin strips. Add herbs and dress the salad with oil, salt and almonds cut into thin strips.

### To complete the dish

*4 asparagus stalks  
rocket, turnip, wild pea and acacia flowers*

*Brown the heart pieces in a pan and finish cooking in the oven at 200°C for 4 minutes. Sauté the asparagus stalks with a little oil in a pan, then cut them into strips and arrange at the centre of the plate. Place the two sauces and the salad on the plate. Slice the heart and lay over the asparagus strips. Decorate the salad with edible flowers.*



## Marinated mackerel and Atlantic bonito with borage granita and olive ice cream

for 4 people

### For the mackerel and bonito tartar

2 mackerel, about 400 g each  
1 Atlantic bonito, about 600 g  
80 g raw cane sugar  
80 g vanilla-flavoured salt

### For the olive ice cream

500 g de-pitted taggiasche olives  
400 g water  
50 g glucose  
100 g inverted sugar  
100 g extra virgin olive oil

### For the borage granita

1 bunch borage  
500 g ice

### For the marjoram crumble

125 g flour  
125 g almond flour  
90 g butter  
5 g salt  
5 g chopped marjoram  
1 egg

### For the mint ricotta

200 g ricotta  
10 g extra virgin olive oil  
1.5 g finely chopped mint  
salt to taste

### For the bonito carpaccio salsa

1 cucumber  
4 petals tomato confit  
chives  
apple vinegar  
salt and oil to taste

Clean and fillet the mackerel and bonito. Place the fillets skin-side down on a baking tray. Mix the salt and sugar and sprinkle lightly over the fillets. Leave to marinate in the fridge for 8 hours, then, with the help of a brush, remove the excess marinade from the fillets and place in the fridge covered with baking sheets.

Make a syrup with the glucose and inverted sugar. Blend together the olives with the water and oil then mix with the syrup. Adjust for salt and place in the freezer in a Pacojet glass or ice cream maker.

Remove and rinse the borage leaves. Blanch for a few seconds in boiling water and then cool in ice water. Once cold, drain and blend with the ice. Place in the freezer in a Pacojet glass or ice cream maker.

Mix together the butter, salt and marjoram with the blender paddle, then add the flours and finally the egg. Form a loaf then place in the freezer to rest. Once frozen, grate over a silpat non-stick baking sheet and bake in the oven at 180°C for about 6 minutes.

Mix all the ingredients and place in the refrigerator until ready to serve.

Prepare a brunoise of the cucumber and tomato petals, adding the finely chopped chives. Dress with apple vinegar, salt and oil.

### To complete the dish

squid ink bread, oil, salt, lime zest, herbed pepper

Slice the bonito for the carpaccio and place 3 slices on grilled bread crostini. Finish with a spoonful of cucumber brunoise over the fish. In a corner of the dish and on top, make small flowers with the mint ricotta. In the opposite corner, arrange the mackerel tartar, seasoned with oil, salt, lime zest and herbed pepper. Place a spoonful of borage granita on top of the tartar and garnish with a piece of toasted squid ink bread. At the centre of the plate, place a spoonful of the crumble with a quenelle of olive ice cream on top.



## Ricotta with lemon confit, celery, tomato and basil

### For the ricotta semifreddo

250 g ricotta  
100 g cream whisked to peaks  
22 g dextrose  
66 g egg whites  
30 g water  
112 g sugar

Make a syrup with the water and sugar, bringing it to 121°C. Whisk together the egg whites and dextrose, adding the syrup slowly to form a meringue. Once cool, mix together 130 g of meringue, cream and ricotta.

### For the sablè pasta

2 boiled yolks  
100 g 'type 00' flour  
45 g corn flour (cornstarch)  
100g cold butter, cut into cubes  
50 g icing (powdered) sugar

Sift together the butter, flour and cornstarch into a standing mixer. Add the yolks and finally the icing sugar. Roll the pastry 2 mm thick and mould into donut shapes. Bake in the oven for 5 minutes at 180°C and store in a hermetically sealed (airtight) container.

### For the tomato sauce

40 g honey  
40 g sugar  
500 g tomatoes

Blanch the tomatoes, peel and quarter them and remove the seeds. Melt the sugar and honey in a saucepan, add the tomatoes and bring to a boil. Remove from heat, blend and strain.

### For the tomato water granita

450 g tomatoes  
100 g ice  
basil

Blend tomatoes and ice; strain. For every 200ml of strained water, add 3 g basil and freeze.

### For the pine nut crunch

50 g pine nuts  
100 g sugar  
salt  
citric acid

Caramelize the sugar to 170°C then halt the cooking by adding citric acid. Add the pine nuts, a pinch of salt and roll out on a silpat non-stick baking sheet. Cut into strips when lukewarm.

### For the celery sauce

125 g milk  
17 g glucose syrup  
13 g gelatine  
70 g water  
500 g white chocolate  
420 g fresh cream  
425 g blended celery

Soak the gelatine in water. Bring the milk, glucose, water and gelatine to a boil. Pour the milk mixture onto the chocolate, mixing to obtain a creamy gloss. Add the cream and celery and blend with a hand blender. Store in the fridge. Stir before serving.

### For the lemon confit

6 lemons  
150 g sugar

Cover the lemons with aluminium foil and bake them in the oven at 145°C for 2.5 hours. Remove the pulp with a spoon and filter. Add the sugar and cook on high until glossy.