

ALONG THE RIVIERA  
Part Two

By Misha Mariani



Grace Kelly and Cary Grant in "To Catch a Thief" (1955)

When considering Italian vacation spots, the usual suspects always come to mind. Sicily. Portofino. Venice. Rome. Florence. But what and where is Alassio? A small town located on the Italian Riviera that never seems to be part of the conversation, it is the home to one of the most marvelous estates and scenic views you can find in Italy.



In the late 19th century, two Scottish noblemen took up residence there for their entire winter vacation. Quickly recognizing the beauty of this small town, they bought two pieces of land along the hillside and began constructing what would end up being one of the most beautiful and breathtaking natural parks and landscapes I have ever set eyes on.

The property has changed hands a couple of times over the past century and quarter, but what was always a major focus and commitment by all of the owners was the appreciation of and dedication to preserving this estate's aesthetic landscapes and gardens. What began as an infatuation with horticulture owing to travels around the globe led to the planting of hundreds of exotic plants amidst the region's indigenous varieties. What was created was a natural park of such beauty that just to walk the grounds for a day is worth a visit to **Villa della Pergola**.

My wife and I weren't just lucky enough to tour the grounds and admire the beauty that makes up this natural landscape; we also had the good fortune to stay a night and dine at its exceptional restaurant, Villa

della Pergola (right), as well as Villino della Pergola and La Casa del Sole, has a number of different suites all dedicated to different residents who might have stayed at the estate over the course of history or were once owners who perpetuated its glory. The night we stayed there, we were shown to the Thomas Suite (below), also called "the blue room," dedicated to Sir Thomas Hanbury, a British businessman who at the age of 25 created the great botanical gardens at Capo Mortola in Ventimiglia.

The walls were painted a soft periwinkle blue with white crown molding. Furniture was adorned with plush white quilted cushioning, a bow window looked out over the gulf of Alassio, and 19th century portraits of Sir Thomas hung over the bed's headboard, paying homage to the estate's history.

Villa della Pergola isn't home to just beautiful gardens and



luxurious suites. It also has Restaurant **NOVE**, which served up one of the best meals we had over the course of two weeks of travel. My wife and I settled in for lunch at a table outside in the garden underneath what I believe is one of the oldest trees on the property. The tables were adorned with dove grey linen tablecloths, white linen napkins and fine silverware.

We started off with a glass of Champagne and then moved into a multi-course menu showcasing Chef Giorgio Servetto's impressive talents.

The cuisine at NOVE is definitely elevated

and takes a page from more modern techniques and philosophy. But what can often get lost in such an approach, as happens with too many young chefs in an effort to dazzle, is a focus on the food itself. At NOVE, the essentials of good cooking don't get lost.

First came an *assagio* of creamy *burrata* enrobed in tomato jelly over a dollop of basil *spuma*, a beautifully successful rendering of the old classic "Caprese salad." This was followed by *verdure con bagna cauda*, a dish of raw or barely blanched vegetables with a "warm bath" of anchovy dip and a touch of heat (right). *Albenga zucchini* was presented in perhaps our most memorable dish of the year, with what looked like a colorful camouflage of dried and powdered fruits and vegetables—a display of modernism in cuisine as tasteful as it was visually appealing. This was followed by al dente risotto made with *seppie* ink and a touch of lemon and a *besugo*, a local fish, with spring pea





## MARIANI'S

05 NOVEMBRE 2017



puree, pole beans and quenelles of tomato confit. All of this was finished off with a perfectly made espresso, and a hazelnut mouse sandwiched between a thin sheet of chocolate and passion fruit *gelato* (left).

Villa della Pergola proved to be one of the top-notch estates in Italy, and I'm grateful we had the good fortune to experience it. It's never easy saying goodbye to somewhere you love and found so much enjoyment in, but it was time to travel on and we said our bittersweet farewells and continued along the Riviera.

Our journey then took us along the Ligurian coastline and we finally hit the French border. Our drive took us past the gastronomically acclaimed Menton in France, into Monte Carlo for two nights at the Metropole, and then into St. Tropez, where the famous and über-wealthy dock their yachts and head into town to splurge on clothing, dining and partying till the wee hours of the morning. For me, St. Tropez wasn't what I had expected. Whatever romantic idea I had of it was quickly spoiled by the mainstream tourist trap restaurants along the harbor and

even down the small side streets, where you would hope to find a quaint little local place.

While disappointed, we were happy some locals recommended Plage des Salins, which is 600 yards of beautiful sand and crystal waters with such a high salt content swimming to the bottom is a challenge. We dined at the exquisite restaurant **La Voile** in the **La Réserve** resort (right) located just outside the small hilly town Ramatuelle, which is what most people must imagine when they think of countryside towns in the south of France. The town resides with winding pedestrian streets that traverse homes that go back to the Middle Ages. But La Réserve is no Middle Ages structure. It is an elegant, refined, modern, state-of-the-art property that boasts tranquility, relaxation and a state of mind that connects you to the beauty of the ocean and its coastal views all accessible throughout the property.

In addition to the regular room and suite accommodations, La Réserve also has a number of private villas that can be rented. La Voile, the restaurant, stakes its claim in the center of the resort, with open floor-to-ceiling windows looking out onto the ocean. This is where we had lunch. I remember the feeling when I sat down. It was this immediate moment of calm and relaxation, much like that feeling you get immediately after your first sip of a cocktail after a



long day, only the drink wasn't necessary this time to obtain that feeling.

The man responsible for the menu at La Voile is Chef Eric Canino. With the mission of La Réserve (left) to be a health and tranquility resort, his cuisine runs parallel to this effort. His dishes and cooking are dairy free, and the only fat used in his preparations is olive oil. Up until this point, as a former cook and someone who puts as much butter as eggs in his scrambled eggs, I would frown on or dismiss such a non-dairy idea. Nevertheless, Canino has accomplished a delicious surprise; his food is laser focused, entirely committed to quality of the ingredients, much of which comes from the onsite garden, and so perfectly balanced I marveled at the talent of this chef.

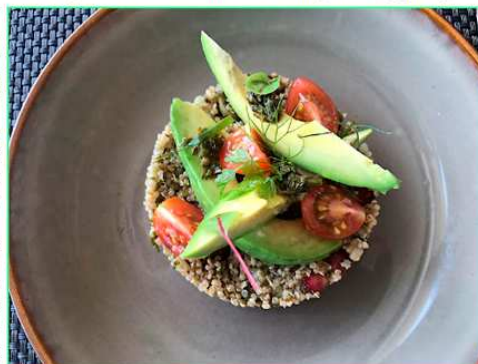
For our lunch, we started off with an *amuse bouche* of tender artichokes cooked in a *barigoule* with a fine herb vinaigrette and shallots cooked with *sakura* vinegar. Octopus (below) was perfectly braised and served with peeled new potatoes, roasted baby peppers, herbs from the garden and extra virgin olive oil. The most pleasantly surprising dish was a quinoa salad, which my wife ordered, that was accompanied by pomegranate,

virgin olive oil. The most pleasantly surprising dish was a quinoa salad, cucumber, avocado and a chimichuri sauce. Perhaps it was my narrow-mindedness, but I hadn't had high expectations for the quinoa salad (right). That changed immediately after my first taste. The olive oil and avocado added the richness and fat depth typically lacking in other examples, and it was all perfectly balanced with bold flavors of the sauce and a striking acidity to bring it all together.

Following our appetizers, I thoroughly enjoyed the grilled whole Dover sole with *riz japonais au basilic thaï*, spiked with just the right amount of sakura vinegar. Thai basil and dressed with a touch of brown butter, capers and tiny



toasted croutons. This complemented my wife's *suprême de volaille rôti et légumes de saison*, roasted breast of chicken with seasonal vegetables.



Dessert was no less impressive—a *mille-feuille à la vanille de Madagascar*, perfectly brittle to add texture to the vanilla-hinted pastry crème and accented with toasted hazelnuts. *Tarte au citron meringue et gel yuzu* (left) was delicious, exciting the palate with its citrus dimensions. And allow me to remind you that this was all enjoyed while sitting next to the open air and looking out onto the sea.



## MARIANI'S

05 NOVEMBRE 2017

To wrap up our trip, we hopped in the car and headed back to Milan. But before doing so, we picked up a freshly baked baguette, some French butter, and a small wedge of cheese so that we could make ourselves a little lunch without stopping. Despite all of the luxurious meals and dining experiences we'd had, there is very little that measures up to the perfection that is a truly great sandwich made from such glorious French products.

With our bellies full and being fully caffeinated by espresso (only in Italy can you get a perfectly made espresso in a porcelain cup in a highway gas station), we landed back into Milan where we settled into the über-luxurious **Baglioni Hotel Carlton**, located on the innermost ring of via Senato, central to everything you'd want to see and just a five-minute walk from the Duomo di Milano, La Scala Opera House, the Brera Gallery, the Galleria Emanuele and the heart of



the fashion district. You couldn't be better situated to take advantage of what of the city offers.

Our suite was styled in a traditional décor of patterned hard wood floors, heavy woven draperies, decorative crown and wall molding, ornate ceiling chandeliers and a coffer ceiling (*above*). Some of Baglioni's other suites and accommodations are done with a bit more modern/contemporary flare, with deep, bold red velvets and clean, hard lines. Regardless of your taste in interior design, you will find yourself pampered throughout your stay.

The Baglioni isn't just a place to rest your head, as they have a full accoutrement of amenities from fine dining at the upscale clubbish restaurant, **Il Baretto** (*left*)--particularly popular before the opera--to casual bites and cocktails in the **Art Déco Caffè & Terrazza**, to pampering yourself in the health & wellness spa. It's also a good business traveler's hotel, with comfortable public rooms

to meet in. A lavish breakfast is inclusive, and the hotel features a number of special offers, like "Stay an Extra Night" and discounts of rooms booked a week in advance, making it one of the less expensive deluxe hotels in Milan.