



Sydney institution Machiavelli spawns a colossal, uber-glamorous Eastern Suburbs offshoot.

# La vita è bella

By Leah Twomey Photographed by Anson Smart



THIS PAGE: a choice of three seating areas: the main area, the bar or the more intimate banquette seating help to define the immense space. OPPOSITE PAGE: torta caprese.



There's a dictate in the black-and-white photographs projected on the walls of Rushcutters Bay restaurant Bar Machiavelli. High on the rough brick walls of the cavernous space that was once a tyre factory, projections rotate through Italian glitterati. Up flashes Sophia Loren tucking into a plate of spaghetti; Audrey Hepburn in *Roman Holiday*; Anita Ekberg in *La Dolce Vita*; Dean Martin in a tux; Danny DeVito snapped mid-guffaw. Charm and vivacity splash across quadruple-height walls, nudging the diners below to enjoy sweet life the way Italians do so well.

Owner and chef Paola Toppi — whose mother, Giovanna, still runs the family's original eatery, Machiavelli, a Sydney institution of nearly 30 years — recently opened this offshoot with the idea that a place like this could hark back to the days when restaurants were a destination. "When I grew up in Sydney there was a fantastic place on Stanley Street called Mario's," Toppi remembers. "There was a long bar down one side of the restaurant and it was packed. This generation has missed out on that sense of fun with the lockout laws. I never used to go out until midnight; now you have to be home by midnight. I want diners here to have fun like I did in those days."

Toppi, whose food is a mixture of refined elegance and good rustic Italian cooking, grew up watching her mother prepare the dishes she learnt as a domestic cook for the upper classes in Naples. She astutely tweaks traditional dishes: her bolognese, for instance, is not made with red wine but a mix of brandy and madeira for sweetness. The custom pasta room behind the kitchen (visible through glass walls) is where she makes perfectly silky pasta by hand: spaghetti for the marinara, pappardelle for the duck ragu. Antipasti include robust culatello salumi with creamy burrata and figs or sweet cherry tomatoes, depending on the season, and calamari fritti. The menu proves that simple things, done with expert hands and excellent produce, are the best.

Toppi engaged eminent Australian interior designer (and *Vogue Living* columnist) Jason Mowen to fit out the space, including the wonderfully imposing mural featuring a dual-headed work by British artist Robert Doble. "Doble's figures on the rich, purple background have a classical feel that plays on Ancient Rome and the Italian Renaissance, as well as loosely referencing Machiavelli and the concept



The popular Spaghetti Machiavelli, with prawns, mushrooms and a spicy basil and butter sauce.

*"The idea of the gold bar is that it sits alone like a glowing structure"*

— DESIGNER JASON MOWEN

of duality," says Mowen. A shimmering bar, painted in Resene 'Gold Dust' with a brass countertop, divides the main dining room from a romantic area of red-leather banquette tables for two. "The idea of the gold bar is that it sits alone like a glowing sculpture," the designer explains, "slightly at odds with the rest of the room."

Mowen has created intimacy with clever use of subtle mood lighting. Tall custom floor lamps are inspired by those in the 16th-century Castello Ruspoli castle north of Rome, while the large octagonal centre table, embellished with rams' heads, is inspired by a Diego Giacometti table in Hubert de Givenchy's country house.

"The concept was to celebrate the grandeur of the space," says Mowen. "Each element speaks subtly to Paola's Italian heritage, but juxtaposed against this enormous, highly textured industrial space. We tried to make it quirky but also sophisticated. And sexy — it's a place that comes alive at night." And coming alive it is. In recent years, the site has hosted restaurants Neild Avenue and Martin Boetz's Rushcutters, with varying degrees of success. Right now, it's full each night (and taking bookings). It's enchanting and yet refreshingly far from stuffy. "I love it, I'm really happy," laughs Toppi. "It's the first time I've got exactly what I wanted." *VL*

Bar Machiavelli, 10 Neild Avenue, Rushcutters Bay; [barmachiavelli.com](http://barmachiavelli.com).

MACHIIVELLI

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: the polished glow of the gold bar contrasts the textured raw surfaces of the industrial space. Large projections adorn the high walls. Intimate banquette seating for two. 1970s brass lamps by American sculptor C. Jere top the custom table.



Culatello salumi with burrata and figs (above) with affettati misti, a selection of cured meat.



Poached John Dory fillets in a lemon and orange sauce.



Interior designer Jason Mowen (left) with owner and chef Paola Toppi in front of Robert Doble's mural; the background is painted in Resene 'Castro'.



Toppi prepares the day's fresh pasta in the glass pasta room.