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AUTOGRILL/ITALY

Thrill of the grill

Italy's premier fast-food pitstop has hit the slow lane. Its restaurants are now embracing sustainability and provenance with tasty results.

By *Laura Rysman*

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Autogrill was born on the road. As Italians motored along their first highways in the postwar boom years, the roadside pitstop became a symbol of progress, mobility and a new kind of consumption: fast food, done the Italian way. Today Autogrill has 4,200 locations in 31 countries but as the future of food shifts from fast to slow, the company sees charm as an important ingredient in sustaining its success.

The original Autogrill Pavesi opened in 1947, merging with competitors Motta and Alemagna to become Autogrill 30 years later. "Autogrill is 'grab'n'go'," says CEO Gianmario Tondato Da Ruos. "Our service is for travellers whose time is short so our mission is to simplify their lives."

And that's more travellers than you think; about 900 million to be exact. Whether you're slinging back a latte at Denver Airport or tucking into a falafel wrap in a central London station, there's a high chance that Autogrill and its subsidiaries are behind your snacks. That's because the vast majority of Autogrill's business (a whopping 90 per cent) is done via concession contracts – which include huge F&B players such as Starbucks – for a grand total of 300 brands owned or under licence.

Recent improvements have taken the form of technology: payments can be made by phone, portable buzzers let diners wait at tables rather than in line and there are touchscreen kiosks for quick ordering. But beyond this the firm has been able to create a sense of place in the most transient of places.



(1) Autogrill CEO Gianmario Tondato Da Ruos

New ideas usually begin at the Autogrill headquarters in Milan, where a basement kitchen serves as the place to test innovations. Here, the team experiments with new food ideas weekly, trying them out on chefs and food specialists. "Even if it's not an innovation that you enact tomorrow, it explores ideas that you want to put into use. For us the difficulty is then finding a way to replicate it not only in Italy but everywhere we are in the world."

The team's decision to use sourdough called for a radical solution; it requires frequent kneading and "feeding" to keep it alive and, as a result, has always been the specialism of small bakeries. In partnership with Esmach, Autogrill designed a machine that can maintain the temperamental dough, working it as required. It has now become standard at all Autogrill bistros, with a single sourdough recipe from a Lombardy baker informing every machine worldwide.



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Many of their collaborations are on view in the CEO's office, including specially designed panini griddles and baking ovens, and a cocktail machine – still in the experimental phase – with a shelf of spirits on tap and the ability to mix a perfect drink. Tondato points out that research indicates the increasing automation of the labour-intensive food industry. Robots may soon take over some manual jobs, such as putting together panini, but not everything can be computerised. "With us there's always the local component, which requires a human touch," he says reassuringly.

Whether reindeer sausage in Helsinki or chicken wings in New Jersey, Tondato says that every location's menu is rounded out by regional cuisine. Autogrill collaborates with the Slow Food organisation and its



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COMMENT

The five ingredients for a perfect meal

According to Autogrill CEO Gianmario Tondato Da Ruos

1.

Sourdough bread

A dark, wholewheat sourdough bread; the less refined it is, the more I like it.

2.

A good salad

With high-quality fresh vegetables and simple condiments: olive oil and salt. I usually produce the olive oil myself.

3.

A simple pasta or rice dish

Spaghetti and tomato sauce done really well, which for me means super al dente. A risotto

would be *alla Milanese* or made with the bitter *radicchio* Trevigiano of my home town.

4.

Red wine, obviously

Even though I love all of them, if I had to choose just one for the rest of my life it would have to be a barolo.

5.

The right environment

Deep comfy chairs, a steady table, bright lights so it's possible to read and zero music unless it's a bit of jazz and I don't mean lounge music – I mean real jazz.

school, the University of Gastronomic Sciences in Pollenzo, to research culinary traditions and small-time suppliers in every region where the company operates. The relationship between the fast-food corporation and Slow Food was diffident at first but Tondato approached Carlo Petrini, the movement's founder, with a challenge: "If you want change then help us change Autogrill because on this scale we can create a real sense of progress."

For all the Italian cuisine that forms the heart of Autogrill's menu, strict standardisation of recipes and

methods maintains quality even in countries unfamiliar with the ins and outs of focaccia and the nuances of Neapolitan-style coffee. The coffee, for instance, has been studied and standardised down to a tenth of a gram. Months of research produced the final recipe: an organic fairtrade blend, infused for five seconds and percolated for 25 – but not more than 30 – seconds.

"Old professions – baker, barista – are being reborn," says Tondato. "The classic 'quick-service restaurant' is in crisis now; its style is out

(1) Freshly made pasta (2) Il Mercato del Duomo, one of Autogrill's new Bistrot restaurants (3) Pizza station (4) Italian desserts prepared on site (5) Shop floor (6) Raw materials (7) Bistrot hamburger (8) Crisps fresh from the fryer



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of date and its offerings are seen as less healthy," he says. "People today pay more attention to what they put inside themselves than what they wear." Amid all the fast-changing food trends the business is focusing on improving what it already does well. When Autogrill launched people were excited by futuristic concepts in food but today customers desire authenticity and transparency.

In response Autogrill has introduced a new "bistrot" format. First rolled out in Milan in 2013 as the Bistrot Centrale, the concept is still formulated for Autogrill's itinerant customers but with more emphasis on quality ingredients and preparation. Information is on view about each ingredient's origins, bakers prepare pizza and focaccia with local flour, a stand churns out fresh salads and juices from seasonal produce and an open kitchen serves fresh pasta and other warm dishes. This is where quick service meets modern expectations.

And the bistrot concept is growing: a brand new launch in Montréal tops off a list of locations that includes Düsseldorf, Helsinki, Geneva and Rome airports, the Utrecht train station and the Piazza Duomo in Milan. The retail aspect is transforming as well, with a new concept created in

partnership with food shop Eataly. Last year saw the opening of their massive shop near Modena, offering products from all of Italy along with specialties from the immediate area courtesy of pastry chefs, tortelli producers and balsamic vinegar-makers, among others.

Decades ago the first Autogrills made their mark with radical architecture, such as those spanning highways. They represented all of the future-gazing optimism of Italy in its postwar,

"The classic 'quick-service restaurant' is in crisis now; it's out of date and its offerings are seen as less healthy"

industrialising boom; some are now national landmarks. "People would hold weddings in the bridge restaurants to see the cars going by underneath," says Tondato. But as fast food heads for the slow lane the new look is all about the repurposed and the sustainable. It is buoyed by a common interest in provenance instead of avant garde modernity. "A café shouldn't be sterile; it should have some crumbs on the floor, some people leaning on the bar," says Tondato. "It's a social experience after all. Food is joy." — (M)