



Piazza del Duomo

MILANESE MAKEOVER

It has always had more than its share of Italian style, but now Milan is reinventing itself in preparation to host Expo 2015 next month. WORDS **LEE MARSHALL**

PHOTOGRAPHY: ROBYN LEA



Coming out: Milanese take to the streets; Bulgari Hotel Milan: spaghetti with Piennolo tomatoes, goat's cheese and lemon rind (inset right)

A visitor to Naples, Rome or Venice doesn't need a dinner invitation to plug in to the life of the city, which spills out to the street, the *piazza*, the canal.

However, with the exception of the Quadrilatero d'Oro (the golden quadrangle) shopping district, where all the big fashion brands jockey for position, the streets and piazzas of Milan tend to fill up only briefly: once in the morning, when the workaholic Milanese are on their way to the office, and again in the early evening, when they stop off for a little Campari soda *aperitivo* on their way home.

Nobel Prize-winning poet Eugenio Montale once called Milan a "huge conglomerate of hermits". Maybe climate had something to do with it. Milan is notorious for its hot, humid summers and cold winters when the Po Valley fog often rises to cloak the city. However, the Milanese these days are a lot more social. Today's "hermits" like to fill their caves with friends. They dress up for the opera at La Scala, they dress down in studiously ripped jeans for fashion shows and art gallery *vernissages*. The upper echelons swan from private *palazzo* to invitation-only reception, from baroque ballroom to modernist villa. With this passion for indoors, it's no surprise that the city is the hub of the Italian interior-design sector.

Until now, its lack of flamboyant streetlife has dampened Milan's appeal for visitors in search of *la dolce vita*. But this is changing. Slowly but surely, Milan is coming out.

It all started in the 1980s, when a cocktail and club scene began to form around the Navigli, an area of former industrial canals south-west of the city centre. Today, it's nightlife central, especially in summer, when crowds of Negroni-cradling hipsters spill out onto the canal-side roads. During the two annual womenswear fashion weeks, in February and September, and the April furniture fair, the scene percolates northwards into Zona Tortona, a former factory district that now hosts design studios, funky bars and event spaces such as Giorgio Armani's catwalk theatre, Teatro Armani.

The real news of the past decade has been the transformation of the Brera-Solferino-Porta Nuova axis, a 15-minute walk north of Teatro alla Scala. At first, as you wander through the cobbled lanes of the arty Brera district, the changes are subtle, the most striking being the opening of a flagship Gucci men's store in 2013, right across from the museum and art academy. But as they press north, old Milan hands will hardly recognise what was once a sleepy residential district.

For years, fashion maven Carla Sozzani's concept store 10 Corso Como – a boutique, design store, gallery, bookshop, cafe and B&B – was the only outlier of cool north of Via della Moscova. Now it's been joined by a host of others – such as sister establishments Pisacco and Dry. When hyper-deli Eataly opened a branch just around the corner last year, it was clear Via Solferino's time in the sun had arrived.

VENTURE EVEN farther north, towards what was formerly a post-industrial wasteland around Porta Garibaldi train station, and Milan's new heartbeat goes off the chart in a remarkable new high-rise skyline, which began to take shape in 2010. At the base of Italy's tallest skyscraper, César Pelli's 231m UniCredit Tower, Piazza Gae Aulenti is the poster-child for Milan's new *al fresco* soul, its fountains and cafes inviting Milanese to dawdle over a cappuccino.

A network of pedestrian ramps and walkways connects this urban plaza with Corso Como to the south and Isola to the north. The latter is a former working-class enclave of the city fast undergoing gentrification thanks to daring new inserts such as Stefano Boeri's visionary Bosco Verticale (Vertical Wood), two residential towers with a forest of mature trees springing from their overlapping balconies. Some way to the north-west, Milan's former Fiera (trade fair) complex is the location for CityLife, an entire new mini-district of the city that is a ▶



Clockwise: pop-up bar at ex Ansaldo, a former electrical plant in Zona Tortona; Luisa Beccaria store in Brera; Duomo di Milano; mounted police at Piazza del Duomo; Carla Sozzani



PHOTOGRAPHY: ROBYN LEA





Shaking it up at Dry cocktail bar

starchitect showpiece, its residential, office and leisure spaces designed by the likes of Zaha Hadid, Daniel Libeskind and Arata Isozaki, among others.

If Milan is kicking against Italy's recessionary gloom, it's also thanks to the city's successful bid to host the 2015 Expo (May 1 to October 31). Locals are hoping that next month's World's Fair, with the theme "Feeding the planet, energy for life", repeats the success of Shanghai 2010. Even the weather is playing ball. According to a University of Berkeley study, foggy days decreased by a third between 1990 and 2010. It's improbable the city will become a place of long lunches and work-shy sun worshippers, but at least the Milanese are starting to emerge from their urban caves.

STAY

The playful neo-baroque style of the 77-room **Château Monfort** (1 Corso Concordia, 02 776 761, from €286/\$422) makes for a refreshing change from the prevailing designer minimalism. This 2012 novelty is a romantic refuge from city stress, with a grotto set aside for tastings where wine gurgles from the mouth of a Bacchus fountain.

Ten years after opening, the refurbished **Bulgari Hotel Milano** (7b Via Privata Fratelli Gabba, 02 805 8051, from €590/\$870) is still one of the city's most stylish addresses, its sober, masculine decor playing

against the bling frequently associated with the brand. The secluded garden bar attracts plenty of local movers, shakers and supermodels around aperitivo time.

The trendy Navigli/Tortona district's lack of a really persuasive hotel changed in the summer of 2013 when **Magna Pars Suites** (6 Via Forcella, 02 833 8371, from €216/\$318) opened in a former perfume factory. The 28 huge, cool-white suites feel like sharp contemporary serviced apartments, flooded with light even on grey days thanks to plate-glass windows looking onto a central courtyard garden.

If the idea of a boutique bolthole just a short sashay from the fashion strip of Via Montenapoleone appeals, check out **Palazzo Segreti** (8 Via San Tomaso, 02 4952 9250, from €400/\$590). With 18 rooms on four floors, this is a design hotel with weathered oak flooring and exposed brick walls setting off four-poster beds. A little dark, its only communal space is the art-lined entrance lobby, breakfast room and bar. But standards of service are high and this is a place for people who will spend most of the time out exploring.

There are few more delightful B&Bs in Milan than **La Favia Four Rooms** (4 Via Carlo Farini, 347 784 2212, from €90/\$133), a first-floor charmer near Corso Como that belongs to an architect-designer couple with impeccable taste. Neapolitan heirlooms meet '60s design classics and ethnic artwork in the four bedrooms – but best of all is the raised garden terrace, where breakfast is served in good weather.

EAT & DRINK

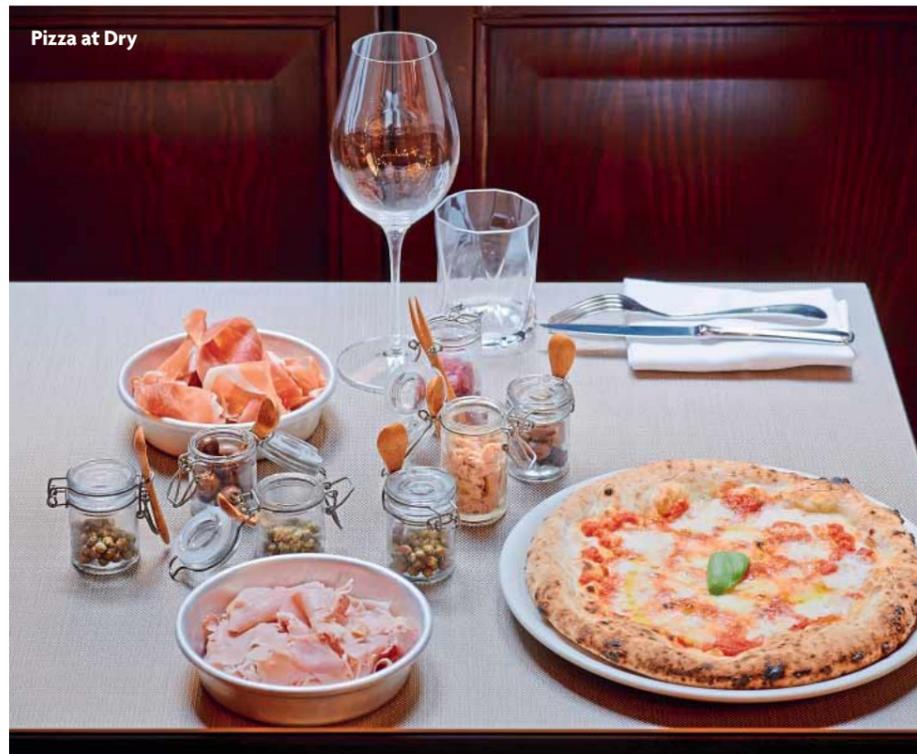
Set up by a group of friends – including an architect, an art dealer

and leading chef Andrea Berton – good-value contemporary bistro **Pisacco** (48 Via Solferino, 02 9176 5472) is informal, artsy and inclusive, the kind of place where you're just as likely to bump into Miuccia Prada as her mailman. The easy-going menu features dishes such as oven-roasted pork ribs with pak choi, sweetcorn and barbecue sauce. It's comfort food for the organic, slow-food generation, accompanied by a good selection of natural wines.

Across the street, and under the same management, **Dry** (33 Via Solferino, 02 6379 3414) is a very cool cocktail bar at the front (don't miss the barrel-aged Negroni) and a more family-oriented pizzeria out back. Its slow-rise pizzas are among the best this side of Naples.

In canal-side Navigli, **Al Pont de Ferr** (55 Ripa di Porta Ticinese, 02 8940 6277) was once a local *trattoria*. It's raised its game, earning a Michelin star with dishes such as the *trompe l'oeil* Tropea onion starter (a sugared shell filled with creamed goat's cheese and caramelised onion), but the down-home decor and laid-back atmosphere hasn't changed. >

PHOTOGRAPHY: DIEGO RIGATTI



Pizza at Dry

 Travel Insider



ONLINE
THE ITALIAN JOB

For more on Italy's fabulous fashion, food, art and history, take a virtual tour with the Qantas Travel Insider.

travelinsider.qantas.com.au

Next door, the restaurant's younger, hipper cousin, **Rebelot** (02 8419 4720) is in the capable hands of Brazilian chef Mauricio Zillo. This is as much a wine and cocktail bar as a restaurant, but you can assemble a full meal by grazing on a selection of gourmet Italian fusion tapas.

For risotto, that most traditional of Milanese primi, **Trattoria Temperanza Da Abele** (5 Via Temperanza, 02 261 3855), an unreconstructed neighbourhood *osteria* in the north-eastern suburbs, always has at least three risottos on its daily specials list.

Of the city's recent rash of fashion designer cafes, Dolce & Gabbana's **Bar Martini** (15 Corso Venezia, 02 7601 1154) is one of the best. Options range from a light lunch in a leafy courtyard to a cocktail in the Martini Bistrot, done out in a decadent 1950s style that comes on like *Mad Men* directed by Fellini.

SEE & DO

Milan has long been more of a business and shopping destination than a tourist city, but it has plenty to detain the sightseer. The **Duomo di Milano** (Milan Cathedral, Piazza del

Duomo, duomomilano.it) is one of Italy's most breathtaking Gothic cathedrals, the facade and roof a forest of fairytale pinnacles. Enjoy it up-close by taking the lift to the top (or climbing 919 steps).

The refectory of **Santa Maria delle Grazie** (2 Piazza Santa Maria delle Grazie), a former Dominican monastery, boasts Leonardo da Vinci's faded masterpiece *Cenacolo Vinciano* (*The Last Supper*).

The **Pinacoteca di Brera** (28 Via Brera), with its Titians, Mantegnas and Caravaggios, is one of Italy's great municipal art collections.

To see how the city's business elite once lived, visit the historic house-museum **Villa Necchi Campiglio** (14 Via Mozart). This urban *piè à terre* of Italy's leading sewing-machine dynasty has stylish interiors, a study in mid-20th century luxe, complete with advanced (for the time) servant-summoning technology. Film buffs may recognise the villa as the setting for Italian arthouse hit *I Am Love* (2009).

In November 2011, Piazza della Scala got itself a second cultural draw to rival the famous opera house – and this one is free. **Gallerie d'Italia**

– **Piazza Scala** (6 Piazza della Scala) houses the art collection of two major Italian financial institutions in an ornate 18th-century townhouse and the former bank next door, where expressionist canvases now hang behind the tellers' booths. Downstairs, the 19th-century collection includes four early works by Umberto Boccioni.

SHOP

The commercial rents are among the highest in Europe and yet established or aspiring fashion brands still queue to secure a foothold inside Milan's **Quadrilatero d'Oro**, or alongside in Via Montenapoleone and Via della Spiga, a few blocks north-east of the Duomo. Here are all the brands that matter, from Armani to Zegna.

A one-stop shop, **La Rinascente** (Piazza Duomo, rinascente.it) is a historic Milan department store whose buyers each season make a convincing selection of major-brand womenswear, menswear and accessories. The basement Design Supermarket is worth checking out.

If the fashion district price tags have too many zeroes, head for

Dmagazine Outlet (44 Via Manzoni & 4 Via Bigli, dmagazine.it). This multi-brand discount store has two outlets on the edge of the Quadrilatero, offering last season's models at last decade's prices.

De Padova (14 Corso Venezia, depadova.it) is a legend among fans of classic Italian design, as are its imaginative window displays. Alongside home and office furniture icons by Vico Magistretti and others, they do tableware and designer toys.

Rossana Orlandi is the queen of Milanese shabby-chic design, and her **Spazio Rossana Orlandi** (14/16 Via Matteo Bandello, rossanaorlandi.com) is a treasure trove of both vintage finds and newly commissioned pieces.

Milanese good taste naturally stretches to food, and **Peck** (9 Via Spadari, peck.it/en) is its high temple. From Parma ham to *funghi porcini* to a balsamic vinegar in a designer bottle that sells at more than €1000 (\$1466) a litre, this deli manages to satisfy most appetites.

✦ For airfares and holiday packages to Milan call Qantas Holidays on 1300 339 543 or visit qantas.com/holidaysaustralianway

DRY PHOTOGRAPHY: DIEGO RIGATTI; TRAVEL INSIDER INSET: ROBYN LEA