

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

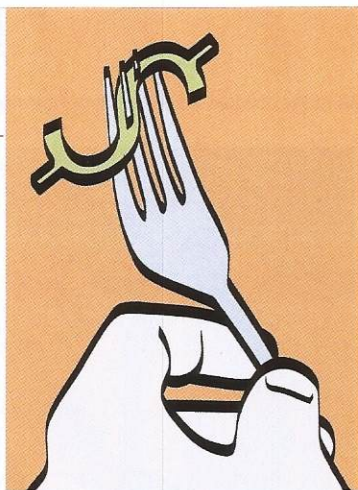
■ BY MOTHER MARTHA

During the 1970s, I was the associate editor of The American Academy in Rome's ancient studies and archeology publications. Twice a day on the no. 41 bus (now no. 870), on the Vatican-side slope of the Janiculum Hill, I would pass by a huge abandoned cream-colored building with gaping windows just across the street from the Pontifical North American College and Rome's Children's Hospital, *Bambin Gesù*. For centuries this eyesore has belonged to the Torlonia family, originally such successful textile merchants and tailors in fashionable Piazza di Spagna that they opened a small bank and became members of the black or papal aristocracy. Until well after the Second World War, the eyesore remained an orphanage for girls run by nuns.

At the beginning of this millennium, the Torlonia family leased this property long-term to the Spanish hotel chain Meliá, which counts 350 hotels worldwide. It took 11 years to refurbish this location into a luxury urban resort. It opened in the spring of 2012 with 116 rooms of 12 different types.

The typically Roman burnt-orange façade has a Palm Beach/Caribbean golf club look. Yet it's only a five-minute walk downhill to St. Peter's and just 15 minutes to Trastevere or across the river to Campo dei Fiori and Piazza Navona. The renovations uncovered the ruins of the prestigious first-century AD Villa Agrippina, which was the home of Emperor Nero's mother. Its gardens extended to where St. Peter's Basilica is today; the saint was probably crucified at the far end of Agrippina's gardens. Many of the Villa's ancient artifacts are displayed in the hotel's spacious public rooms, which include a brightly sunlit library. All these rooms are decorated in subdued beige and cream with touches of red and black except for the bar, with its whimsical red, pink, and purple plush chairs.

The hotel's vast grounds, which include a magnificent swimming pool and state-of-the-art wellness center, are based on Domitia's Gardens, the Eternal City's first botanical gardens, which belonged to Domitia, the sister of Nero's fa-



Stefano Navarini illustration

ther and the wife of Emperor Domitian. All of this makes the hotel a perfect location for a conference, family reunion, wedding or honeymoon, and the understatedly luxurious Gran Meliá also prides itself on being child-friendly. Its younger guests are encouraged to enjoy their own smaller pool, to play freely (but hopefully not unsupervised) in the garden, and to join in activities called "Kids First" organized for them on request: guided tours downtown, drawing and painting, paint your own T-shirt, games and races in the garden, and a daily snack at 5 p.m.

Each bedroom is different. Many of them, and most suites, are decorated in somber colors with a photograph of a famous Roman work of art above the master bed. Most have areas especially designed for children, so the accommodations are appropriate for family vacations. Others can be adjoining. All are spacious, with large terraces and wonderful views towards St. Peter's or over the Tiber. The especially nice rooms are numbers 360, 719, and 603. During low season, the price per night of a deluxe room with breakfast is

398 euros, and in the high season 547 euros.

The Gran Meliá is also proud of its gourmet restaurant "Viva Voce," helmed by the world-famous two-Michelin-star chef Alfonso Iaccarino from Amalfi, also the owner of the "Don Alfonso 1890" restaurants in Sant'Agata dei Due Golfi above the Amalfi Coast, and in Marrakesh, Macao, and most recently in Dubai. Alexis Miceli from the Dominican Republic is the restaurant's executive chef. Among his specialties are fried oysters, couscous with baby octopus in a provola cheese foam and cinnamon, and potato gnocchi filled with creamy mozzarella, baby tomatoes, and oregano. In addition to à la carte, Miceli proposes three seasonal "tasting menus": Tasting (six courses, 95 euros), Vegetarian (five courses, 85 euros), and Inspiration (four courses selected by the chef, 80 euros).

Other dining options include "Liquid Garden," a poolside lounge bar in a grove of sweet-smelling orange trees, and the rooftop "Lunae Terrace." In Italy, Meliá operates hotels on Capri, in Como, in Genoa and in Milan, and a second, less expensive one in Rome at Via Aldobrandeschi 223 off the Via Aurelia, about three miles from Vatican City. ○

GRAN MELIÁ ROME A LUXURY RESORT IN THE HEART OF THE CITY



Above: View of the Gran Meliá Hotel from the garden. Left: Chef Alexis Miceli in the circle. His dishes: pasta "hats" stuffed with oxtail, pecorino cheese foam, and crisp Spanish prosciutto; homemade spaghetti with saffron from Navelli in the Abruzzo; fava bean, pea, and asparagus shoot purée flavored with springtime black truffles; snapper sausage in "candida" sauce with zucchini and crisp white chard; a bar of duck's liver paté with raisin wine gelatin, raspberry drops, and a crisp made of pepper from Jamaica

