



RESERVATION ROAD
A sampling of dishes from D'O, where entrees top out at around \$18. Its 40 seats book up as much as eight months in advance.

AT 8 P.M. ON A BALMY summer Wednesday, the dining room at D'O begins filling up. A young couple gets cozy at a corner table, while nearby three men in fine Italian suits study the menu, giddy with anticipation—for the savory baba with fresh watermelon and prosciutto powder, or the burnt-flour pasta with hazelnuts, tamarind and sea beans. They've been waiting a long time to eat here. The restaurant, in a nondescript town just outside Milan, may be Italy's most elusive reservation. Its 40 seats book up as much as eight months in advance. The low-key trattoria is an unlikely sensation, with a single long-standing Michelin star and not much décor beyond scrapbook-style black-and-white photos of the chef and his team. Davide Oldani, the slim 47-year-old behind the place, certainly has a finely honed palate, but it's the restaurant's cost-to-quality ratio (entrees max out at around \$18) that has kept the place thriving. "I like

THE BUSINESS OF FOOD

STORY OF D'O

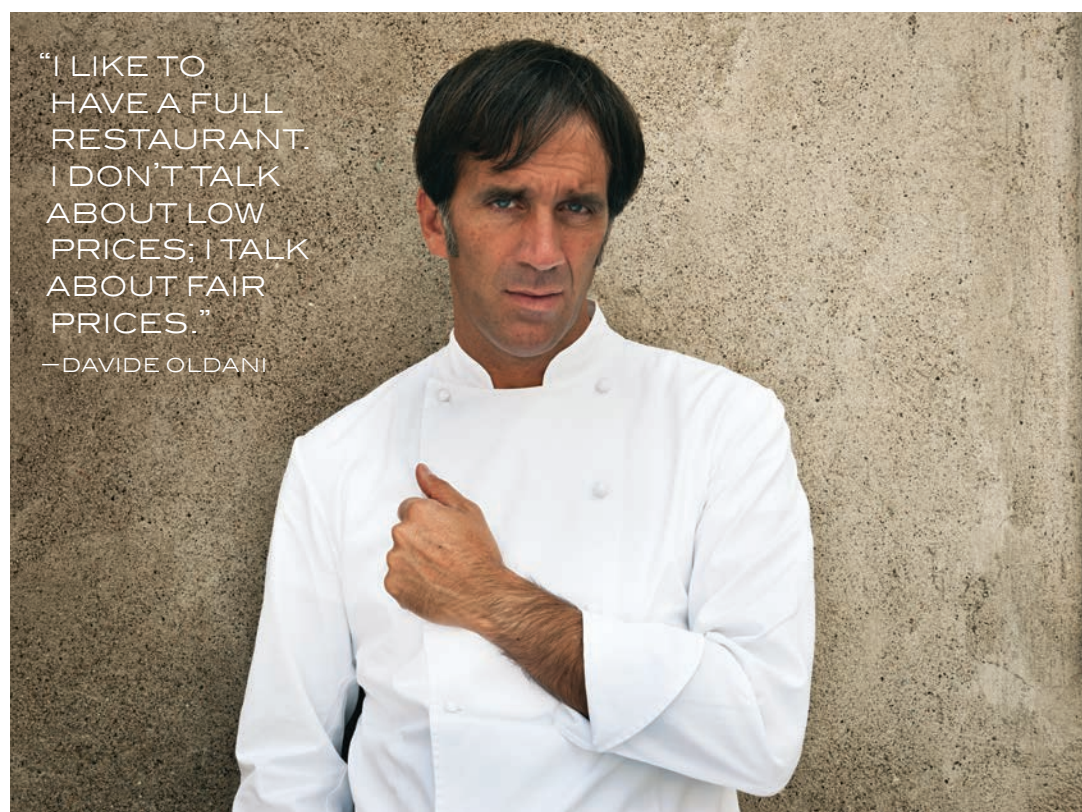
After years of taking it slow, Milan restaurateur Davide Oldani expands his empire.

BY JAY CHESHES
PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEFANO TRIPODI

to have a full restaurant," he says. "I don't talk about low prices; I talk about fair prices."

Two years ago Oldani was invited to address a class at Harvard Business School to discuss a case study an Italian professor had written on D'O. The students grilled him on his plans. "They wanted to know what's next," he says. "I told them, 'I'm going slow, slow, slow.'"

Oldani has found culinary renown without expanding too fast. His restaurant in the village of Cornaredo was bought and paid for long ago without any help from outside investors. The Harvard appearance finally gave him confidence to explore new opportunities. Last spring he opened a casual Davide Oldani Café—a licensing deal—at Milan's Malpensa Airport. This summer he'll launch a new flagship around the corner from D'O; and in the fall, a concept called FOO'D opens at one of Manila's Shangri-La hotels. "If I move into the city, there's >



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a lot of competition," he says, touring his future flagship just as construction work begins. "Here I'm the only game in town."

The new spot, designed by modernist architect Piero Lissoni, will be more than twice the size of its sibling, with nearly 50 seats and a test kitchen in the basement where the chef can audition dishes for special guests. He hopes to open by midsummer during Expo Milan, the food-themed world's fair that's expected to draw some 20 million visitors to an open-air compound a short drive from the restaurant. Oldani, an official Expo ambassador, will run a small cafe at the fair, serving a few simple sweet and savory dishes highlighting Milanese ingredients and his distinctive Cucina Pop style—as he calls his Italian spin on democratic fine dining. Though few Italians have tasted his food, the chef has been pushing his philosophy for years, through television (he's the head judge on a prime-time cooking competition) and cookbooks (his first one in English is out this spring).

As an occasional spokesman for more than a dozen international and Italian brands, Oldani boasts as many sponsors as a Formula One driver. He's backed by Samsung, which supplied equipment for the R&D section of his new kitchen, and Mercedes, which every year gives him a new car to drive. The fashion designer Giorgio Armani is so enamored of his cuisine, he flew Oldani to Paris last year to cook for 480 guests at his One Night Only soiree at the Palais de Tokyo.

CUSTOM BLEND Oldani (above) creates his own line of utensils and dishes. Top right: Espresso spoons, designed by the chef to stir sugar without disturbing the *crema* on top.

Oldani thinks like an industrial designer, seeking innovative solutions to problems most chefs and diners haven't noticed. A meal at D'O might start with soup in a wide-brimmed bowl, of his design, with a sloping base that makes it easier to spoon up every drop. Wine is served in glasses with one edge of the rim set higher than the other, allowing variation in how close the aroma gets to your nose. To save room on the table, and to encourage diners to sample every flavor with one bite, he created the *Passepartout*, a combination fork, knife and spoon. "To appreciate our food you have to pick up all the ingredients together," he says. "If you use a fork with a bit of spoon and a bit of knife, you can get it all at once." Corporate executives have noticed the chef's knack for design and started to enlist his skills. He's conceived of water glasses for San Pellegrino, espresso cups and spoons for Lavazza and a new line of unbreakable melamine dishes for furniture maker Kartell that debuted at the *Maison & Objet* show in Paris this winter.

Oldani grew up five minutes away from his restaurant in the same building he now lives in with his girlfriend, Evelina Rolandi, and their infant daughter, Camilla Maria (his mother still lives in the building too). At 18, while attending the nearby cooking school he recruits most of his staff from, he landed a summer job working for Gualtiero Marchesi, the first chef in Italy to earn three stars from Michelin. He sat outside the main kitchen cutting open hundreds of prickly sea urchins and dreaming of joining the core team inside. "In Italy back then, above Marchesi there was nobody," he says.

The maestro eventually became a mentor. After an apprenticeship, Marchesi sent Oldani out into the

world to learn from other masters (just as Oldani now does with his top talent at D'O). After a few years on the road—cooking under Alain Ducasse in Monaco, Michel Roux Jr. in London and pastry chef Pierre Hermé in Paris—he returned to work for Marchesi, opening new restaurants for him outside Italy.

In 2003 he struck out on his own, launching D'O with a simple idea: serving Michelin-star cuisine at prices anyone in town could afford. Ingredients were humble and local—no foie gras, caviar or truffles. Lunch included a prix fixe option: \$14 for two courses with coffee and a glass of wine. News soon spread of a Marchesi acolyte who was practically giving away his cooking. "They couldn't believe it," says Oldani. "They wondered, 'What is he doing?'" The food cognoscenti came out to the suburbs to see for themselves—and never stopped coming.

You can still buy two courses at lunch for \$14, though these days you'll have to spring for your own wine and coffee. It's not much more for an à la carte meal of the chef's now famous onion *tarte tatin* with Grana Padano ice cream, his spare, golden souffléed frittata and his modern spin on risotto Milanese, featuring a bright spiral of saffron sauce atop al dente white rice.

With his new flagship and other ventures, his food will become much easier to sample. "We have plenty to do," says Oldani, well into his busiest year ever (in addition to the new restaurants, he's launching his own *salumi*, a signature olive oil—in powdered form—and a risotto). "I want to reach more people," he continues. "The Pop philosophy is not marketing; it's something serious—it's about high quality that's accessible, too." ●