

HEAVEN... *in four* MINUTES

It takes a lot to get **Nellie Nichols** really excited when it comes to food. But a new Italian flatbread sandwich concept called Piada has done just that. With two shops in London, this is a new experience that's not to be missed

Where do all the good ideas come from? There's a school of thought that says if you live at the intersection of social worlds you are more likely to spot good ideas working in one context and be able to seed one or more of them into another context.

Apparently these people are called connectors and the closer an idea comes to a connector the more power and opportunity it has. Let's face it, creativity is a bit of an import/export game – finding an idea where it works well and then identifying a new target audience for it.

I think half the time the good ideas are under our noses and we're just really bad at thinking laterally enough to find

them. We spend far too much time locked in meeting rooms with flip charts and chocolate biscuits (and why is it the pens never work) trying to be clever and think up new stuff when the good stuff is there anyway but we just overlook it.

This happens frequently in the world of convenience food with recipes that get more and more complex with the constant addition of ingredients and sub recipes. I think the reasoning behind this is 'the more you add the better it gets'. How much further from the truth can we possibly get?

It's really not rocket science to work out if a food has been around for hundreds of years it must be well worth noting. It's likely

to have the credentials of being simple to make, cheap and delicious. If we spent a bit more time researching the history of foods the law of averages says we'd be falling over a lot more commercial opportunities.

The best possible example of this I can give you is the original street food of Romagna on the north east coast of Italy. A flatbread called Piadina, Piada or even the Pie, it has many names but the substance has been the same since the Roman times when it was used as a plate and then eaten after the food that had been placed on top of it.

The *azdore*, the housewives of Romagna, created the unleavened dough combining traditionally 'poor' ingredients of flour, water, salt and lard. After resting the dough they would roll it out using a *s'ciador*, the rolling pin also used also for making tortellini.

The piadini was then cooked on the *teggia*, the typical hot round clay tile leaving it for two minutes on the flame until it started to bubble, before turning it clockwise, as tradition dictates, using a flat blade knife, before flipping it over to cook quickly on the other side.

Filled with whatever was available - a little local cheese, some pork scratchings, a handful of greens,





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some garlic and a splash of olive oil - these have always been eaten piping hot, folded in half.

How fabulous to be able to get hold of what countless Italians consider to be Italy’s best street food, made just as it should be, here in London? But to replicate such an art would surely need years of experience from an Italian without the slightest trace of compromise coursing through passionate veins?

I think, just maybe, I’ve found him: a Neapolitan with a raw, burning, committed fervent talent, by the name of Renato Sommella.

Renato opened his first Piada with his business partner Kate Stewart and their daughter Emma in St Johns Street, Farringdon, in 2006. He’s a true blooded Italian, Kate is Irish and Emma a vibrant, sparky, bilingual mixture of both, who greets me at the ultra-modern, black red and white Frith Street second store, stunningly designed by Pocknell Studios.

She makes me an Illy coffee and

serves it to me with a Sfiogliatelle, meaning leaf pastry, the genuine Neapolitan article - the thinnest, crispest, delicate melting layers filled with ricotta and lemon. But best is the tiny doll like Caprese Bianco miniature cake made with lemon and almond flour, just two bites and sadly it’s gone.

Just these two cakes illustrate in a second that everything here is pure, just as it should be and made from scratch and I feel transposed as if I am suddenly sitting in the middle of an Italian square outside the oldest of churches in the bright Spring sunshine.

Kate arrives and she is the spitting image of Vanessa Redgrave; serene and calm she proves to be the lynchpin.

Later on, when I meet Renato, I realise that all three of them form the perfect triangle, each providing the concept with a totally different character and talent.

This is their family business and theirs alone and it shows in everything they do, every customer they speak to and serve, but what strikes me is that

absolutely nothing is too much trouble and they all so enjoy everything they do.

The anticipation of trying the Piadas is getting to me a bit. Emma, who has worked with her father on and off since the age of 12, makes them for me herself and it is not until I see them do I realise they are truly something very special, one of the most genuinely delicious things I have eaten in years.

Very occasionally, but sadly now so rarely in a blue moon, do I think if I do die tomorrow I know I will have experienced today eating something remarkably unique that will be very hard to forget if I don’t. Hot, crispy but still soft and chewy at the same time, this is a thrilling rollercoaster of textures, the Alton Towers of hot wraps.

With their trademark golden browned spots, I try one filled with Bresola, Parmesan and Rocket and another with the most delicious Italian Goats Cheese I think I’ve ever come across with Tomato and Rocket.

There are fifteen in total, each grilled to order and each numbered charmingly in Italian. with the exception of the very unlucky Italian number thirteen. This is the daily language practised by so many of their customers when they try out their Italian accents and saves us all from the notion that calling sandwiches by silly names amuses anyone at all.

Each piadina is made to order in a matter of four minutes, which is all it takes to bubble up on the bespoke griddle and then be flipped over and filled with no more than two or three of the most authentic Italian meats or cheeses and then covered with a handful of fresh rocket and a splash of olive oil.

So why in the world is this bread so awesome? Without doubt it’s simplicity; freshness and crispness also has a great deal to do with it but a remarkable and innovatory ingredient is also a key factor. Kate explains that importing a recipe containing lard was hardly likely to impress a modern consumers’ health conscious world, so Renato introduced a clever substitute; a patented product

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called Solivoil, a solid form of Extra Virgin Olive Oil.

This is weird but very wonderful. A solid with the consistency of a cream, it can be spooned and yet contains no scary stuff; magically it's nothing more than 100% Extra Virgin Olive Oil. The production process remains a tightly guarded secret, the only certainty being that a temperature of -30 degrees is required to change the state

Piadinas and delicious cakes are far from alone in Renato's repertoire. There are two daily pastas and risottos, two soups and salads. Each recipe is made by hand in the smallest of kitchens by a team that can cook in the space of a sixpence because they know and love what they are doing.

Would I like to try a risotto?

Today's special is made freshly for me ahead of service, bright with ochre yellow saffron and chunks of Speck. I'd love to stay and finish it but Emma and Kate are driving to the other store and keep encouraging me to come and meet Renato.

Well, having heard so much about him it's a done deal really and we all



fit like peas in a pod in Emma's black mini with the most hideously awful Hubba Bubba bright pink leather seats and cruise along to St Johns Street.

Renato is charming in a 'don't mess with me', Marlon Brando sort of way and in no time shows me down into his basement, where everyday he makes his beloved fresh dough and I see the remarkable Solivoil with my own eyes.

Do I have time for some pasta? Would I like red or white? He is welcoming and full of anticipation and so am I. He makes me two tasting bowls of pasta: Penne with nuggets of bright green crispy broccoli, mixed simply with Fontina cheese and Speck and some Gnocchi with Buffalo mozzarella, cherry tomato sauce and basil leaves. He has a vast menu of

pastas and risottos he cooks from everyday: Tortellini, Fuseli, Rigatoni, Orrechiette, Sedanini and more, but quite frankly it's clear he just makes each one up using his love of good food and his natural talent.

With my commercial hat on, I suggest that there's an opportunity to stack piles of filled ambient Piadinas on the counter for those that may not want to wait. I, for one, would find it as delicious still crispy and soft, just different to a hot off the griddle one.

Is a four minute transaction time too long for possible expansion into parts of the city where waiting is simply not an option? I am reminded in a sort of Italian way that Piada states clearly it serves 'Italian Slow Food Fast and Fresh' which kind of explains it very well I'd say.

Apparently its devotees are more than happy to wait four minutes for such a remarkable hot lunch and now I've experienced it first hand I totally understand why. Come to think of it I know I would be happy to wait longer. All the best things in life are worth waiting for, as we know, and here is something that is absolutely, without a doubt, well worth the wait. So beat a path to their door and try one yourself, I think you'll see what I mean.

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The above is based on her independent views

