

Pier Review

For the freshest, most succulent seafood in Italy, cast around for an overwater restaurant on the Abruzzo coast



By DAVID FARLEY

AROUND NOON on July 30, 1627, the earth began to violently shake in southeastern Italy. Houses crumbled. Stone towers tumbled. The Adriatic Sea temporarily retreated for miles off shore and then came crashing back in the form of a tsunami.

Around the same time, a large, extended family from southern France was making its way down the coast of Italy to Abruzzo, about 125 miles east of Rome. Sephardic Jews who'd grown tired of being persecuted, they'd set their sights on this isolated seaside swath of Italy in search of a haven and a new life. The 50-member clan, whose last name was Veri, decided fishing was their best opportunity. There was only one problem: They couldn't sail or even swim.

Back in France, they'd been wooden bridge builders. And so one day, a member of the family had an idea: build a wooden "bridge" into the sea. At its very end would be a massive net they could lower via pulleys into the water to entrap all manner of fish and sea creatures. It worked. And since so many locals had a newfound fear of the sea and its unpredictability after the earthquake, these piers, so close to shore, seemed a safer alternative to boats.

As my rental car swerved down the curvy coastal road south of Pescara, the historic piers—called trabocchi in the plural—began revealing themselves. I had officially entered what is now called the Costa dei Trabocchi, or the Trabocchi Coast, a 45-mile stretch of shore along the Adriatic Sea from the towns of San Vito Chietino to Vasto. These spindly piers whose stilt-like legs hold up a net, antenna-like poles and a small roofed shelter, resemble giant alien spiders cooling off 100 or so feet out in the sea.

Some of the trabocchi are a few centuries old and each

was once the domain of individual fishing families. In the last decade or so—as the sons of fishermen opted to deviate from their fathers' footsteps—about 15 of these piers have been converted into seafood restaurants. Going from fishing pole to fork has given new life to the seemingly delicate piers. Today anyone with about \$60 and a hankering for a delicious three-hour meal can eat on the trabocchi.

My first stop was a pier called Punta Punciosa. The afternoon became a blur as an edible ocean landed on my table during a lunch that stretched into the late afternoon: olive oil-drenched anchovies on baguette slices, sautéed cod sprinkled with pine nuts, guanciale-wrapped shrimp, octopus with samphire, bread crumb-stuffed calamari, mussels cooked in a garlicky white wine sauce, pasta with frutti di mare, and, finally, a heap-

Dining on the piers is 'like blind dating for your palette.'

ing plate of fried cod, anchovies, sardines, calamari and shrimp. At the other tables sat a gaggle of laborers blowing off some Friday afternoon steam, a couple and a family celebrating a birthday. As far as I could tell, I was the only foreigner.

A few days after my first such feast, I cast my gaze upon Trabocco Cungarella, built in 1938, in the town of Vasto. It was only my second trabocchi dining experience but I was already sensing a pattern: No one hands you a menu at these pier restaurants. You just sit down—in summer months reservations are necessary—and await the procession of whatever local fishermen caught that morning. A bottle of Trebbiano d'Abruzzo or some other crisp local white wine from the region is uncorked. And the three-



or four-hour meal commences. "It's like blind dating for your palate," said my friend Rosana di Michele, a chef who splits her time between Vasto and New York City.

In between courses of a whole branzino and shell-shaped conchiglioni pasta laced with mantis shrimp, Mirko di Nanno, the owner of Cungarella, stopped by our table. "I bought the trabocco in 2006 to fish on it," he said, adding that his fisherman father has owned one for decades. In 2012 [CK], he opened up a small eatery on the pier. Originally, trabocchi restaurants mostly served diners fish their owners had caught by lowering their big nets into the water. But due to overfishing and popularity of the restaurants, that's no longer possible. Mr. di Nanno claims he still gets a quarter to a third of the fish from his net. "The rest comes from those guys right there," he said, pointing to a small cluster of boats docked on the shore near the pier.

Another day, a friend of a friend took me to a trabocco called Punta Tufano. Fabrizio Lucci, who gives tours of the trabocchi through his company Italia Sweet Italia, considers it his favorite. It's a "trabocco informativo," meaning it serves to educate the public about the history of these piers via displayed historical explanations. It's also, of course, a restaurant.

After we sat down, a young woman uncorked our bottle of wine and the meal commenced: lupini clams, native to the Adriatic, swimming in a tangy marinara sauce and then spaghetti

wrapped around shrimp and mussels. A tall, dapper-looking man brought over a large bowl and set it on our table. It was *brodetto vastesse*, a fish soup from nearby Vasto filled with scorpion fish, mantis shrimp, cod, clams, and whatever else was fresh that day. He introduced himself to me: Rinaldo Veri, an ancestor of the original trabocco-building family.

After dinner, Mr. Veri called me over to the end of the pier where the net was hanging above the water. "Want to do some fishing?" he asked. I nodded tenta-

tively, not sure what I'd just agreed to. And then he waved me over to a wooden column as thick as a telephone pole, from the side of which a handle-like beam juttied out, and told me to push the handle around in circles, essentially activating the pulleys as I lowered the net into the sea. About 30 minutes and two shots of grappa later, I raised the net by cranking the handle in the opposite direction. "This fishing method and the technology that goes with it has not changed for centuries," said Mr. Veri, as I grunted trying to pull the net up. Then, he raised his hand

NET WORTH

Clockwise from left: One of the historic pier restaurants on Abruzzo's Trabocchi Coast; a trabocco feast at Punta Tufano; seafood pasta at Punta Tufano

to indicate I could stop.

I walked over to see our catch. In the net about a dozen puny anchovies flopped around. "Well, I guess we'll be visiting the local fisherman soon," he said with a laugh.

For more details on visiting Abruzzo, see wsj.com/travel.



SURF SUP Punta Punciosa serves multi-course seafood meals for \$60 a person, including wine.