

The Italian mob

CHIEF Umberto Bombana of the Toscana restaurant in the Ritz-Carlton said he was looking forward to the singing in the kitchen almost as much as the food.

This week, nine women chefs representing the finest of Italy's regional cuisines, are offering a series of set dinner menus at Toscana, simply entitled "Le Donne at Toscana".

The idea of inviting the women chefs was fashioned after a successful charity gala dinner at Rex il Ristorante in Los Angeles, where Bombana worked as a chef.

The one-off event, which began here on Monday, includes seminars on Italian regional cuisine, cheese, prosciutto, olive oils and wine, presided over by Mauro Vincenti, owner of Rex il Ristorante, Umbrian wine-maker Marco Caprai and olive oil producer Francesco Ferrini.

Italy is perhaps the only country in the world that is renowned for women chefs.

Chefs Bombana and Ritz executive chef Donald Berger suggest this is related to the woman's natural role as family provider in Italy, and to a passion for the

Nine strong women chefs have taken over the kitchen at the Ritz-Carlton and they are cooking up a culinary storm, writes David Clive Price

kitchen that, unlike the interest of many male chefs, concentrates on the food more than its presentation.

"Male chefs often internationalise their cuisine," says Bombana. "The women are not so interested in experimenting with other techniques. They go for authenticity rather than showing off."

Mauro Vincenti elaborates further: "Women are more attached to tradition than their male counterparts.

"*La cucina della madre* has always played an important role in Italian cuisine. Restaurants in Italy being a relatively recent phenomenon, the majority of recipes were passed down from mother to daughter.

"Italian cuisine is based on the family, and on the local countryside; so too are Italian restaurants.

"In fact, the number of women in Italy's most famous kitchens exceeds that of men."

Among the chefs featured in "Le Donne at Toscana", are Giovanna and Paola Vissani (tomor-

row and Saturday), of the Vissani Civitella Del Lago in Umbria (rated 19.6/20 on the *Gault Millau*, the culinary Richter scale of the *Guida d'Italia*).

They will present seabass with oregano, accompanied by a caponatina (a Neapolitan version of ratatouille) as well as lasagne of scampi and leeks with chopped black olives.

Another keynote is regional flavour. The ingredients and techniques used by Angela Campana, chef of the Ristorante Bacco in Barietta, Puglia, are taken from southern Italy; for example, her involtini of eggplant filled with monkfish and bell peppers stuffed with pecorino cheese and capers.

There are light and healthy contadina (peasant) foods, refined and low in calories, suggesting the sun and sea. Many Italian chefs, such as Bombana, say that the refinement of southern cooking, which is based on olive oil and vegetables rather than dairy products, will be the future route taken by Italian cuisine.

An interesting variation

on this theme is provided by Federica Suban (Friday), whose Antica Trattoria Suban in Trieste, was founded by Giovanni Suban in 1865. Using her repertoire of 19th century recipes devised for the Hapsburg emperors, she introduces duck breast with tokay wine, almonds and grapes. Earlier in the week she presented one of her renowned risottos with a central European version of salt-cured smoked ham or wild boar.

Rosanna Romagnoli (Friday) of Ristorante La Perla at Fiumicino, near Rome, is famous for fish dishes cooked with home-grown herbs and greens. Her seafood strudel offers zucchini on a bed of puff pastry, spread with mussels, mozzarella, butter and bread-crumbs.

On Saturday, Rosaria Martufi presents one of the most characterful regional dishes in the whole of Italy. The chef/owner of Ristorante Villa Herculius in Fruggi, Lazio serves a millefoglie of potato bacala (salted cod), black olives and capers - a refined version of

the rustic food many visitors to Venice know.

On the same day Katuscia Silverstri of the Taverna del Pescatore in Trevi, Umbria, serves a deceptively simple frittatura (omelette) with black truffles and pork loin marinated in apple and olive oil, a classic Umbrian dish.

Rusticity, refinement and the feminine approach are the hallmarks of "Le Donne at Toscana".

"The women's touch is better than the men's," says Bombana, "even if they

have to be strong to run their kitchens".

Desserts reflect this. Today pastry chef Paola Vissani offers a Saint Honore, on the 16th Romagnoli, a zuppa inglese, on the 17th Odette Fada a sabbioso (zabaglione with Sirena liqueur), and on Saturday Paola Vissani, a mimosina with dark chocolate sauce.

At \$888 for six courses, including two glasses of wine, this is a rare occasion to experience a range of Italy's best chefs, and perhaps hear a few folk songs belted out in the kitchen.

Seminars will precede the dinner, at 6 pm. "Le Donne" runs through to Saturday. For more information phone 2877-6666.