

Supperclub Roma

Rumour has it that Nero fiddled while Rome burned. Chances are that on that scorching July night in 64 AD, he was simply doing what Romans did best – throwing a lavish dinner party.

Such banquets were an integral part of life for the upper echelons of the Roman empire. Dinner guests would recline on couches padded with cushions while slaves served them the delicacies of the day – pigeons, flamingos, sow's udders and roasted dormice.

Two millennia later, in 2002, Supperclub Rome opened in the Italian capital to put a contemporary twist on the hedonistic pastime, taking the concept of dining – and clubbing – to a new, horizontal level. (Whilst, thankfully, updating the menu to the 21st-century.)

Located in the heart of the old city close to the Pantheon and just a short stroll from the Spanish Steps and Trevi Fountain, Supperclub Rome is a beautiful marriage of the ancient and modern. On the site of Nero's old bathhouse (a glass window in the floor looks down onto an original well), the stunning contemporary interior – with a reverent nod to the classical – has been designed by award-winning Amsterdam architect bureau, Concrete.

The year it opened it was courted by the global style gurus at *Wallpaper**; the following year declared the best Italian restaurant in the world by the discerning *Condé Naste Traveller*. It's no wonder that fashionistas and foodies alike are flocking to the ultimate wining, dining – and reclining – experience in Rome.

It all begins at 7pm with an aperitif within the sexy velvet lush of "Le Bar Rouge" or the minimalist "Champagnerie Art Gallery". Cocktails imbibed, guests enter the pure white "La Salle Neige" or adjacent "La Salle Baroque" for their four-course "late light dinner". Shoes are removed as diners crawl onto one of two levels of "beds" in La Salle Neige – or the one big bed in La Salle Baroque (adorned by a 500-year old ceiling fresco, discovered during renovations).

Like their ancient counterparts, they lay back on soft, white pillows while the latter-day "slaves" – sexy creatures in ultra-violet face paint – bring in silver platters of food and offerings from an eclectic wine list that would put a wicked smile on the face of Bacchus.

Senses are further assaulted as DJs spin upbeat lounge in the background, videos are projected onto the walls, masseurs are let loose, and a variety of offbeat acts are performed between courses (Lenny Kravitz even treated diners to an impromptu 30-minute concert here).

It all seems so delightfully civilised – especially compared to the renowned debauchery at Roman banquets. So why was it that the nuns in the city were particularly horrified when Supperclub Rome first opened there? (Not least, with the lorry loads of beds that heralded its arrival...)

Probably, because Supperclub has its origins in the *enfant terrible* of Europe – Amsterdam – where its reputation always precedes it. The first Supperclub was opened there 15 years ago by a group of artists and – although a nightlife coup – was a financial mess. Then, seven years ago, businessman and bon vivant, Bert van der Leden, took it over and, together with Douwe Werkman at IQ Creative, nurtured the Supperclub into having the international reputation and allure it enjoys today. And, if they're not known for their restaurants, they're certainly known for their music. Since 2000, they have released eight lounge CDs, compiled and mixed by their own DJs, in the "Supperclub Presents..." series.

The partnership are also the creative brains behind Amsterdam's Nomads restaurant where the concept has been given an Arabian twist and, below it, Club More, their über cool nightclub. The newly-opened restaurant, Envy, is their latest contribution to the city.

Additionally, the Supperclub concept has been seamlessly translated onto a 1960 ship once used by the late Queen Juliana of the Netherlands to entertain visiting dignitaries. Onboard the "Supperclub Cruise", guests can catch the sun on the top deck, sip champagne and cocktails in

the bar below, and retire to dinner on the lower deck while it sets sail from behind Centraal Station.

Sipping champagne in KLM's VIP Lounge at Schiphol Airport en route to Rome, I ask owner Van der Leden, a well-heeled, gentle father figure-type with a playful look in his eyes, about the type of people drawn to the Supperclub.

"Artists, writers, fashion designers, tourists from all over the world... and young couples who have saved up their money to celebrate a special occasion. We even have 60- and 70-year-old couples coming along. Halfway through the evening you can see they have fallen in love all over again," he muses.

"Simon Le Bon has been to Supperclub Rome, and Brad Pitt and Mick Jagger are regular visitors to Supperclub Amsterdam – where Dennis Hopper recently popped in. The Dutch Crown Prince Willem Alexander and his wife Maxima also dined there one night not so long ago. The celebrities particularly like the Supperclub because their privacy is respected and they don't get any attention."

Hours later, after negotiating Rome's Fiumicino Airport and a white-nuckle taxi ride into town, I'm sitting out on in the sun on a square by the 2000-year-old Pantheon. I ask Van der Leden about the philosophy behind the success of the burgeoning Supperclub empire – which has just seen its latest addition open its doors in San Francisco.

"It may be suprising but actually we're not a business where we plan where we're going to open in 2007... and where we going to open in 2008. We just go with the flow. For example, I recently met Robert De Niro in New York – a very nice man – and he was interested in collaborating on opening a Supperclub there..."

"It may be hard to believe," he continues. "But we don't actually do it for the money, we do it for the pleasure. What's more important is that the Supperclub is a place which brings people together in peace and harmony... a place where people are inspired to interact with each other. I admit it's a kind of hippy idealism," he chuckles. "But then again, I *am* an old hippy..."

Later that evening, I head to Supperclub Rome to find out what all the fuss is about. By midnight, I'm feeling positively pampered as I lay back, sated by baked calf's heart with wild mushroom cannelloni in a truffle sauce, and strawberries with champagne sabayon, vanilla and almond crunch. I glance around the room. By now it exudes a sexy, almost tangible, synergy and everyone is smiling. One diner, in the middle of a massage, is oblivious to all. Another takes a photo with his mobile phone to send to friends on the other side of the world. And a group of dancing girls shyly approach the microphone to sing along to the music. Nero would be partying in his grave.

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