

In search of the Italian job

With Masters degrees in gourmet food and fashion, Milan's SDA Bocconi knows how to teach Italy's business skills, says **Peter Brown**

What's this? A Masters course with a monthly dinner provided by a succession of famous chefs? Where's the catch?

There isn't one, says Massimiliano Bruni. "Except we're not only going to taste the food. We'll also have the chefs telling us how they go about combining different products and experiences to develop ideas, and how cultures are merging."

With Giorgio Lazzaro, who is passionate about finding the perfect tomato ("it's so rare to get both flavour and colour") Bruni directs the new Masters in fine food and beverages at SDA Bocconi in Milan.

The SDA, pronounced *zda*, stands for Scuola di Direzione Aziendale and

means business school. Bocconi is generally reckoned to be the best in Italy and its series of new Masters programmes aims to exploit the country's traditional

strength - small businesses working at the top end of global markets.

The one-year fine food Masters is aimed at professionals in the industry and another bonus is the chance to spend a week as an apprentice chef at the Alma training school in Colorno, Parma, a short drive from Milan. There, in palatial surroundings, students learn everything from basic pasta cooking ("the best wheat comes from Utah," says Lazzaro, "but it's what we do to it here that matters") to choosing the perfect black truffle or buffalo mozzarella.

The course costs €25,000 (£20,800) and is extremely practical. The idea is to focus not on the mass market but on companies with quality products, studying how they deal with retailers, customers and suppliers. Students will visit different regions of Italy - for example, two days in Trieste looking at how Friuli coffee has been remarketed.

Running parallel with this course is - naturally, for Milan - a Masters in fashion, experience and design management. These are among 11 Masters programmes now taught in English at Bocconi. A new one will soon be starting in design and innovation management, says Giovanni Valotti, who runs the division.

Four of these are MBAs:

as well as the full-time course there are part-time, evening and global executive courses.

Bocconi, which is more than 100 years old, can afford this variety because it's a big international school, with more than 800 Masters students each year. In the English-taught classes almost 70 per cent of them come from outside Italy.

The school is in the heart of Milan, which has advantages. There are fashion shops at every corner. The nightlife throbs. The Alps are within sight, the beautiful Italian lakes are nearby

and Milan is the home of Italy's stock exchange.

The Italian economy generally, however, is in the doldrums, with a 0.5 per cent growth rate, and perhaps because of this Bocconi has

slipped slightly to 48th place in the FT global MBA rankings. The average Bocconi alumnus salary is \$95,494 (£50,255).

One forthcoming boost will be in the form of Expo 2015, which will be held in the city on an appropriate theme: "Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life". This is about to bring Milan a lot of investment, says Alberto Grando, Bocconi's dean.

Since Grando was appointed in 2006, the school has seen a mini-revolution, with its domestic programmes cut back and the international ones increased. "Next year," he says confidently, "we will improve our position."

The full-time MBA has been reduced from 14 months to 12, Italian dropped as a teaching language in favour of English, and a clutch of new exchange partnerships formed. Global MBA students, for example, now spend time at UCLA in California and at Fudan University, Shanghai.

Moving to an English-taught MBA was, Grando accepts, a brave decision. "But the best Italian students wanted to join the international class and to be exposed to a multicultural environment. They have to learn English. After all, they want to find an international job."

MBA students – average age 29 – can benefit from Bocconi's expertise in executive education, in which it ranks sixth in Europe. It also has traditional strengths in what Grando calls the hard competencies – accounting, finance and marketing. These form the backbone of the

course, with a month afterwards given to personal skills.

"I teach operations management," says Grando. "Soft skills are really important. People are judged by their attitude, the ability to work with people. But this needs to be built on top of something concrete. Without expertise in accounting and strategy you can't have management."

After this students can choose an individual project, a group project in a company, a research project or an exchange with another university.

The reduction in course length was designed to tailor the MBA to the recruitment schedules of companies such as Johnson

& Johnson, General Electric, the big consultancies and Lehman Brothers, all regular visitors to the campus.

"Some students really want to stay in Italy," says Grando. "But most look at the major financial institutions and know they can work anywhere. We have more than 100 alumni in London."

'It gave me a safe environment to develop'

Mihir Warty, 35, director of policy and performance at Sport England, took his full-time MBA at SDA Bocconi 10 years ago. The project management skills he learnt there, he says, have been very useful in business as well as for planning his wedding this August.

My degree was in economics from Cambridge. Before the MBA I was an economics consultant but I wanted to broaden my experience so I could move into strategy

consulting. I did a lot of research on length of course,

reputation, quality of facilities and the environment. I wanted to study in a city and pick up another language, since I was likely to work in Europe.

The MBA was a terrific experience. It gave me confidence and a safe environment to develop, as well as technical skills in marketing, the law and HR. It teaches you to speak those languages, and it opens doors.

At Bocconi I made a network of international friends that has lasted 10 years. In fact, one of them is helping me choose my wedding suit.

After the course I joined Arthur Andersen, as they then

were, then the strategy team at the BBC. Now, at Sport England, I have a leadership role. Our main focus is making sure there's a fantastic legacy from the 2012 Olympics.

