



Bibiana

RATING: ★★★★★

1110 New York Ave., NW,
202.216.9550, bibianadc.com

What the stars mean:

★ = fair, some noteworthy qualities;
★★ = good, above average;
★★★ = very good, well above norm;
★★★★ = excellent, among the area's best;
★★★★★ = world-class, extraordinary in every detail. Reviews are based on multiple visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambience and service.

THE SCENE *Bibiana is a bright spot for a small-plate lunch fest at the bar and for cocktail lounge nosing. As evening approaches, the restaurant becomes a shining space for leisurely dinners in the glittering dining room.*

WHO'S THERE *Lawyers at lunch, local scene-makers at dinner. Devotees of Bajaj's six other restaurants, who love his style and have the stamina to keep up with him. He indefatigably zips from eatery to eatery all day long.*

GOOD TO KNOW *A few of the smallest plates pack powerful punches. Salted cod fritters, saffron rice fritters with parmigiano and the salumi offerings are delectable.*

HOURS *Monday to Wednesday, 11:30AM–10:30PM, Thursday and Friday, 11:30AM–11PM. Saturday 5:30PM–11PM. Closed on Sunday.*

PRICES *Appetizers and antipasti \$6–\$14, pizza \$10–15, pasta and other entrées \$16–\$29, desserts \$6–9. Specialty cocktails and digestifs \$12.*

Made in Italy?

Can a sparkling downtown osteria and enoteca capture the authentic spirit of *il bel paese*? One of DC's most influential restaurateurs hopes so | *By Mary Beth Albright | Photography by Powers and Crewe* |

Call it my personal quest to perfect *il bel far niente*—the art of doing nothing, and doing it well—but I have a chronic case of osteria hysteria. From the moment my foot lands on Italian soil, I'm nudging through the thick chatter of these casual neighborhood eateries, past old men playing cards alongside gesticulating women. The classic Italian “third space,” a place for impromptu gatherings (think coffee shop with lush wine and fresh pasta) keeps me racking up visits to the Boot.

When Bibiana Osteria–Enoteca opened, I arrived with memories of that bustling osteria on the Italian Riviera, packed to the gills with fishermen and fashionistas, feasting on meltingly fresh whole-roasted branzino in herb butter. An unfair expectation to lob at a new establishment? Probably. But the good news is that the newest offering by DC restaurant mastermind Ashok Bajaj dazzles as an authentic celebration of rich Italian cuisine. No surprise there—Bajaj's restaurants are destinations because his venues offer consistently delicious food in convivial and stylish atmospheres.

But is Bibiana actually an *osteria*? Does DC need another Italian restaurant? Does Bajaj need another restaurant, period? Indeed, Bibiana is bigger than an

osteria—and the term feels more like clever business shorthand for “casual and value.” But the new venue conveys the sophistication and buzz of the restaurateur's other properties, including Oval Room, Rasika, Bombay Club, 701 and Ardeo/Bardeo, with tables practically packed from opening night. Italian wunderkind chef Nicholas Stefanelli rocks bold dishes with true character, proving that he worthily beat out the dozen other chefs who reportedly auditioned for his post. The choice of Stefanelli—whose résumé includes Maestro, Mio and Manhattan's Fiamma—and his apparent culinary freedom, are two of the best ingredients in Bajaj's recipe. Thanks to Stefanelli's *sprezzatura*, Bibiana splits the difference between two very good Italian venues nearby, combining Potenza's brio with Tosca's refinement.

One crowded Friday evening, the wait was an hour long and a dozen lawyers deep—so much for informality—all poised to order a traditional three-course meal, including a glorious version of that branzino. Eyes at all adjacent tables were fixed on my

LA VITA DOLCE
Mod gets glam at this Metro Center Italian space. Sheep's milk ricotta agnolotti (above) is a luscious mouthful.

skillful waiter as he performed a dramatic table-side filleting of Italy's beloved sea bass, parting the bones from two flaky pieces, bright with herbs and served with garlicky green rapini. Such waitery talent is hard to resist. How do I know this? Because the diners surrounding my table copied my order, and I was soon serenaded by the clinking and shuffling of plates as they shared their own sweet branzinos.

Bibiana embraces traditional Italian menu categories—Antipasti, Pasta, Carne, Pesci, Contorni—with updated sweet and savory combinations. *Fichi*—four tender, warm figs, stuffed with ricotta salata and finished with toasted almonds and a reduced grappa sauce—is an extraordinary small plate to nibble on while sipping a Nicoletta cocktail (citron vodka, bitter limoncello and

pinot grigio). Don't miss my two favorite antipasti—four meaty grilled sardines over silky sweet peppers, or thinly sliced veal, roasted rare with a creamy *tonnato* (tuna) sauce. For the less adventurous, but equally discerning, pick a small plate of a few lemony, light veal meatballs, surrounded by rich *sugo finto* (meatless) tomato sauce.

Unless you're versed in Italian food and pasta shapes, you'll need some help interpreting the menu and wine list. The servers shine with the former. "Mix it all together before you eat it, as they do in my home, Calabria!" our server insisted as I contemplated my *seppie in umido*—cuttlefish stew with a pool of puréed chickpeas. The *calzoncelli* is essentially an earthy, mini calzone with perfect pasta wrapped around braised veal, amidst brown butter, sage and pancetta. Our server's recommendation of a *contorni* (a side dish) of *cavolfiori*—cauliflower with garlic and anchovies—tasted of both earth and sea, leaving me to wonder why it's not available as an entrée. *Anatra*—succulent, roasted duck breast—is a texture-symphony when served with soft, caramelized, grilled peaches. Traditional choices abound, too, from *tagliatelle alla bolognese* to *gnocchi*.

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On the Italian-heavy wine list, I can forgive the server's uncertain recommendations, as that country's wines are notoriously tough to pin down. A brief description of the grape or blend on the by-the-bottle wine list helps, but twice when I asked for a lush white, I was given an acidic white pinot noir. It takes a certain gravitas to splash a quote from Ernest Hemingway across the cover of your wine list—offerings had better be plentiful, quality and democratic, just as the renowned spirits-lover liked it. And they better be priced well enough to sneak a bottle with a pal at lunch. In other words, an osteria-enoteca should have a perfect enoteca wine list. Bibiana fits the bill, with plenty of under-\$50 bottles and wines available by the *quartino* (quarter-bottle) or *mezza* (half), as well.

The bar offers a perfect spot for après-work cocktails and pizza, particularly the *l'uovo* with egg and *fonduta*—if you've never had a pizza with the cured and spiced pig fat known as *lardo*, you really don't know what you're missing. Warm panes of primary-colored glass, meant to invoke Milan, soften Bibiana's modern edge. Sleek black leather chairs, abstract stainless steel chandeliers and dark wood are fashionable complements to the menu. But do we really need images of Vespas above the bar to remind us of the restaurant's Italian roots?

Here's a genuine classic touch reminiscent of Italy (no cutout photo of the Leaning Tower of Pisa required): Ten digestifs are served for \$12 apiece, including Fernet Branca, Cynar, Sambuca Molinari, Amaro Abano and limoncello. Enjoy after your creamy vanilla panna cotta over cookie crumbs, which might win best Italian sweet in DC. The bomba chocolate—chocolate glazed mousse with a gianduaia cream center on a chocolate cake—competes for the same title.

At a recent lunch of *agnello*—slow-roasted lamb leg with white beans and escarole—Bajaj made one of his famous rounds, greeting guests and chatting it up with regulars. All of the sudden, he stopped and exclaimed, "I have to go! Robert Redford is at Bombay Club, and I need to say hello." Bajaj, take me on your enviable chore! But the next time the Sundance Kid blows into town, he should hitch up at Bibiana. Compared to the city's Spaghetti Westerns, this refined Italian gathering place is the real deal. And a scene-stealer, at that. ■



THE ITALIAN JOB Ashok Bajaj has style to burn and a flair for success. His new osteria-enoteca brings Italian know-how to cocktails and classic dishes like branzino, served table-side.