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## Best Bites Blog

Daily dispatches on the Washington, DC area's food, restaurant and dining scene.

### An Early Look at Bibiana

By Jessica Sidman Published Friday, September 04, 2009

Restaurateur Ashok Bajaj has long been known for the Indian cuisine at dining rooms such as Rasika and the Bombay Club, and the Modern American cooking at the Oval Room and 701. So why open an Italian restaurant?

“Why not?” Bajaj responds.

His newest endeavor—downtown DC’s **Bibiana**—serves up rustic Italian dishes in a Milano-chic dining room. It’s Bajaj’s seventh restaurant in the area.



“What else can I do?” he asks.

“Jewish deli,” says chef Nicholas Stefanelli, who’s standing with him in the restaurant’s lounge.

“That’s the next one,” Bajaj laughs.

Joking aside, Bajaj says Italian is one of his favorite cuisines. He’s apparently not alone. This year, several Italian eateries have opened—from the red-sauce-focused Potenza and Kora to the trattoria-style Posto—filling Washington’s void between pizzerias and formal expense-account dining rooms.

Although Bajaj flew in chefs from across the country—and even Italy—while searching for a passionate and ambitious talent to lead Bibiana’s kitchen, he ultimately chose a local, Stefanelli. The chef—who polished his skills under Roberto Donna at Laboratorio del Galileo and Fabio Trabocchi at Maestro then ran the kitchen at downtown DC’s Mio—has put together a menu of entrées such as Milanese-style veal cheeks and roasted Muscovy duck breast with grilled peaches and celery root. Pastas range from the traditional *tagliatelle alla Bolognese* to the less common *spaghetti al nero di seppie* (black spaghetti with blue crab).

The lounge and bar, which seats 40, will focus more on small plates, antipasti (think saffron *arancini*) and wood-oven-baked pizzas. The pies will be served in the dining room only at lunch and in the lounge, though diners can specially request one anytime.

The main dining room and a private dining room are done up with dark wood, wide windows, mirrors, and pops of orange. Black-and-white photos of the leaning tower of Pisa and the Colosseum are mounted on the walls, and edgy metallic chandeliers hang from the ceiling.

“The whole idea is to be hip and happening but serving authentic cuisine,” Bajaj says. It’s a formula that’s served him well before. But how Bibiana stacks up against its competition remains to be seen.

*Bibiana Osteria-Enoteca, 1100 New York Ave., NW; 202-216-9550.*

*Open Monday through Friday for lunch, Monday through Saturday for dinner. Small plates and antipasti, \$8 to \$14; entrées, \$16 to \$29.*

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