

## FIRST BITE

Tom Sietsema

### Top Italian Flair at Wallet-Friendly Prices

**“W**hy is an Indian opening an Italian restaurant?”

It's a question Ashok Bajaj says he has heard as he makes the rounds of his many restaurants, including the new **Bibiana Osteria-Enoteca**. “I've already done modern American,” explains the owner of the Oval Room, 701 and Ardeo. “I've done modern Indian,” adds the muse behind Rasika and the more traditional Bombay Club. “I've *done* a wine bar,” wraps up the owner of Bardeo. Plus, ever since he was a child, the restaurateur has been enamored of Italian cooking.

Signed up for a three-year commitment, Nicholas Stefanelli is in charge of the kitchen, bringing with him experience in some top Italian restaurants, including the late Fiamma in New York and the shuttered Maestro in McLean. Though he's buying some of the same ingredients he used in those temples of luxury, economic realities obligate him to display them with less extravagance.

The chef is offering turbot at Bibiana, for instance, but instead of smoking it in hay and gilding it with a sauce coaxed from veal stock and red wine, as at Maestro, he's roasting the fish and drizzling on squid-ink vinaigrette. The downsize idea nevertheless comes with a throwback to the good old days, Maestro's olive oil “crushed” potatoes.

A pizza oven at Bibiana means he can do pies, including a rustic

round striped with ribbons of lardo (raw pork fat) and topped with a trembling poached egg. Pastas run to thin squid-ink spaghetti scattered with Maryland blue crab. There are also veal cheeks, served with polenta and mushrooms. The flavors of these dishes are pure, their presentation simple.

The dining room ignores the recession. It's elegant, with chrome lights, a warm palette and stainless-steel beaded curtains separating the main dining room from a semi-private, more intimate one. Lending a sense of

place are outsize black-and-white photographs here and there of the Colosseum, the Leaning Tower of Pisa and (of course) a Vespa.

Panna cotta makes a lovely ending. It jiggles, as the delicate custard should, and recently came with terrific peaches. The dark and nutty garnish at the base of the dessert turns out to be a crumbled cookie, or, as our server called it, “Tuscan soil.”

*1100 New York Ave. NW  
(entrance at 12th and H streets),  
202-216-9550; bibianadc.com.  
Lunch entrees, \$14-\$24; dinner entrees, \$16-\$35.*



BY EVY MAGES FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

**Bibiana Osteria-Enoteca's kitchen is run by Nicholas Stefanelli, who worked at Maestro in McLean. Simple presentation allows the flavors to shine.**

