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*Musings from Don Rockwell*



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## Fiola, Penn Quarter

Posted on June 23, 2011 by [Don](#)

It isn't, or shouldn't be, my job to correct The Washington Post and Washingtonian for their spectacular failures in reviewing our city's greatest restaurants. If a major publication wants to say Rasika is "four stars," or that The Source is "the number two restaurant in the area," I'll usually roll my eyes, and write it off to different tastes, different talents, and different agendas – overrating a restaurant harms the general public, yes, but it does no harm to the restaurant itself.

I take rare exceptions to this live-and-let-live attitude when both publications grossly *underrate* fine-dining establishments. Four examples where I've done this in the past are [Proof](#) (9/21/07), [Adour](#) (10/03/08), [Inox](#) (4/24/09), and [Sou'Wester](#) (12/17/09). You can click on those links to see what I wrote, and I stand by those words to this very day.

Looking back with today's eyes, the quality of all four restaurants speak for themselves (Inox (now closed) was a Top 3 restaurant in the area for both food and wine). Rather than me saying "I was right, and they were wrong," I'll simply refer folks to my thoughts about two restaurants which received three stars by both the Washington Post and Washingtonian: [Bangkok 54](#) (3/12/06) and [Present](#) (6/12/09).

I reiterate: Bangkok 54 and Present received higher ratings than Proof, Inox, Adour, Sou'Wester, and now ... [Fiola](#).

When Fiola opened, the first thing I did was go to Bibiana. I remember saying to Nick Stefanelli that there was no way I could go to Fiola without first returning to Bibiana – I owed it to him (and had a fantastic meal). Following that methodology, on this evening, it was opening night at Graffiato – I knew where the crowds would be, and also knew that there was no way I could go there without first having a full meal at Fiola.

It was bar manager Jeff Faile's birthday, and I thought if there was ever a night I could sneak in undetected, this was it. Alas, it was not to be: Jeff was working, and I recognized many members of Fiola's staff from other restaurants.

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Dispensing with the pretense of anonymity (I was told, incidentally, that the Post critic had been in five times, so none of us are anonymous), I wished Jeff a happy birthday, and asked him to make me a drink of his choice. "Clear or dark liquor?" he asked. "Gin," I said, and Jeff made me his take on the classic cocktail *Hanky Panky* (\$11), a 100-year-old drink originally made at the Savoy Hotel in London.

After sinking into my cocktail, I switched to a glass of NV *Mionetto Prosecco Brut* from Veneto (\$10), and I'm really glad I ordered it because it was a great match to perhaps the most stunning plate of oysters I've ever eaten: from the *I Crudi* section of the menu, *Le Ostriche* (\$22) was five perfectly white, blotch-free Sunset Beach Oysters, served with cucumber, caviar, and sorrel in crushed oyster water. I'm as price conscious as anyone, and \$4.40 per oyster seems like it's pushing the bounds of sanity, but I'm not only recommending, but urging, everyone to get this plate of perfection – it's no more expensive per bite than an order of upscale *nigiri sushi*, and it's absolutely one of the tip-top plates of food I've had in all of 2011, or for that matter, my entire life. I hate the fact that I'm going to spend \$22 for this the next time I come here, but I am, and I don't care if I have to beg, borrow, or steal to do it.

Onward to a glass of 2009 *Caontine Belisario "Fuso" Verdicchio* from Fabio Trabocchi's home region of Le Marche (\$10). This wine works well with cold vegetarian or seafood dishes (although I'd stick with Prosecco for the oysters), and I enjoyed it with a tasting duo of *Cucumber Gazpacho with Basil and Balsamico* and *Melon Gazpacho with Prosciutto* (\$9). The cucumber gazpacho was the weak link in the meal, as it was relatively bland and tasted of not much more than cucumber (not a bad thing, mind you; just not particularly thrilling, and could have used a bit more seasoning). The melon gazpacho – obviously a little riff on melon and prosciutto – was a can't-miss, classic combination of flavors, and was the better of the two. Still, the Verdicchio paired better with the cucumber, and also carried me nicely into the next course.

I don't care how many times you've had *Vitello Tonnato* (\$18) before – you've never had a better rendition than this one. A hearty portion of classic Tuscan thin-sliced veal, the tuna sauce is given depth, length, and waves of complexity by a little salad of finely sliced green apple (!) and basil coupled with Pantelleria capers. The combination of flavors here is extraordinary, and haunts me as I type this paragraph – I'm craving it right this second, and the way I feel at the moment, I could have this dish every day for the rest of my life and not tire of it – it's the best vitello tonnato I've ever eaten.

And it just keeps going and going. There is no way I was going to dine in Fabio's restaurant the first time and not order his *I Vincisgrassi* (\$25), a classic lasagna from his native Marche with "Bianchetto" sauce (bianchetto is a Italian white spring truffle which can be found in Marche). This is an exceptionally rich, decadent lasagna, packed with fresh pasta, veal, and prosciutto, baked to order in single-serving, multi-layered rounds, and finished with the foamed bianchetto sauce which lightens it only in appearance. I purposefully described this dish before mentioning the wine that I chose with it – and the wine that you should choose, too – a 2009 *Bruno Giacosa Dolcetto d'Alba* (\$12, or \$55 by the bottle). If you're going to get this lasagna, trust me and get the Giacosa with it: think of dark, vibrant, mineral-laden red cherries supported by a backbone of healthy tannins to cut through this wonderfully rich dish.

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Putting aside Jeff Faile and his cocktails, here's a note about Fiola's wine list, overseen by rising-star sommelier Theo Rutherford, that you may not see in other reviews: the night I went, there were 23 wines by the glass, served in excellent stemware, starting at \$8 and averaging around \$11-12. There were 234 dry wines (sparkling, white, rosato, red) by the bottle, 62 of which were priced in the \$40s or less (including 22 bottles priced in the \$30s). With such a big, welcoming bar – which is going to be absolutely packed – this price point looms large for the solo diner.

The pastry chef at Fiola is Jason Gehring, formerly of Charleston in Baltimore, and I could not contain my smile when my dessert of *La Zuppa Inglese* (\$10) arrived. The reason? Growing up, I spent a fair amount of time in Howard County, and my first really "fine dining" experience was at King's Contrivance – a legendary Columbia, MD restaurant which is still long on charm, but has been living off its reputation for decades. As soon as I saw this dessert, I was instantly transported to the English Trifle which King's Contrivance used to serve tableside from their dessert cart. This dessert is essentially an English Trifle, with layers of sponge cake, raspberries, and fresh whipped cream, but it's so much better than any version I've ever had that it seems very appropriate to call it "*La Zuppa Inglese*." I have no idea whether or not Gehring has any exposure to this dish, but it sure is coincidental that he came from the Baltimore area.

You'll notice that I didn't mention any restaurant critics' names in this review, and that's because any critique I have is with the reviews themselves, and not the reviewers. I do not – I can not – proclaim to have any type of broad, deep knowledge about Fiola after just one visit, but I'll say this much: I've initiated coverage by placing Fiola as the number one restaurant in Penn Quarter in the [Dining Guide](#) (available for free, but only to donrockwell.com members (click [here](#) to join)), ranked above both The Source and Rasika. I have not yet rated it at the very highest level, i.e., **bold**, but if my second visit is even remotely like my first, then Fiola will take its place alongside the elite restaurants in the Washington, DC area.

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