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Fiola

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By Tom Sietsema

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Just one bite of the lasagna at Fiola is enough to make me cheer the return of chef Fabio Trabocchi to Washington. Unlike any other layered pasta around, this one involves a round cake of sheer sheets separated by a rich combination of chopped veal, beef, pork and chicken liver. A foamy moat of emulsified mushrooms and Madeira circles the dish, which turns the clock back to the early 2000s and the Italian chef's reign at Maestro, the late four-star restaurant in Tysons Corner.

Out comes silken cod, strewn with dill blossoms and resting on a bed of smoked potatoes and plump little oysters, and the music in my head swells again. The entree, luxurious and novel, is straight out of the Trabocchi handbook. (The Marches native made a fashion out of smoking fish over hay at Maestro.) The thick and rosy veal chop gilded with hazelnuts from Alba impresses, as well. It doesn't hurt that the backdrop for these dishes involves curved white booths the size of Mini Coopers attended by charming servers in custom-tailored burgundy shirts, and a floor of onyx tiles that makes you feel cooler just by gazing down.

Fiola, whose name is an Italian term of endearment that translates roughly as "sweetheart," made its highly anticipated debut in Penn Quarter in April and revels in some choice details. The restaurant, which follows Le Paradou in this space, is also uneven. On my latest visit in June, I encountered an inelegant pile of grilled octopus bogged down by a heavy sauce of tomato and corn, and a rib-eye steak that came out the color I requested but tasted sour in parts, vapid in others. So much food went back to the kitchen unfinished (there was also a side of diced zucchini with not enough of its promised mint) that our table could have fed another party.

Surely that is not what the maestro from Maestro was aiming for when he announced last year the details for his return engagement to Washington after appearing in New York at the distinguished but short-lived Fiamma and then the venerable Four Seasons. Fiola, he declared, would represent "the democratization of gastronomy" in a down economy.

I'm surprised, therefore, to show up at the finished restaurant and find pasta plumped with lobster and a special with summer truffles from Burgundy. If customers imbibe, it's easy to spend \$100 a person for dinner. So much for being "affordable and viable for a larger audience," as the master chef put it this spring.

And for a place that was envisioned as a trattoria, the restaurant oozes opulence. There are no linens dressing the tables, but spiral glass chandeliers and rosewood walls evoke an Italian villa. That's not a complaint, just an observation. The setting, by GrizForm Design Architects, is beautiful.

So is my favorite way to start a meal here. Order a plate of oysters - and you should - and they show up glistening with (Mississippi) caviar and an ice flavored with the oysters' liquor. Threads of lemon peel add a kick to each slurp. One of the more eye-catching salads around is a haystack of julienned artichoke, lemon and fresh mint. Counter to what I tend to taste in a lot of restaurants, however, appetizers tend to be less memorable than entrees. Fiola's tuna tartare, for instance, is no more exciting than standard issue.

Pastas are a draw, even if some feel heavy for this time of year. I'm thinking now of the broad pappardelle made with chickpea flour, tossed with cream-enriched morels and other mushrooms; and hand-cut spaghetti offered with a riff on Bolognese that uses strips of veal, beef and pork and a suggestion of tomato. Risotto decked out with sweet scallops, tomato and fresh herbs arrives in a copper pan; the grains of rice retain welcome bite. Tender ravioli filled with lobster and surrounded by pale orange foam in their bowl are divine, but at \$30 - at lunch - they hardly subscribe to the boss's purported new direction.

Trabocchi cherry-picked talent from a treasure trove of fine restaurants, a move that upset some competitors but results in bursts of distinguished drinking, dining and pampering at Fiola. The biggest coup might have been luring Jeff Faile from Palena in Cleveland Park. The bar master makes some of the best cocktails in the city; his current list embraces both Italian notions (picture a white Negroni) and American tastes (including the Derby, made with Buffalo Trace bourbon, grapefruit juice and honey syrup). Most recently, Theo Rutherford came aboard from Ripple, also in Cleveland Park, to finesse the wine program. Presiding over the dining room is the owner's glamorous wife, Maria, whose sense of humor infuses every encounter. "I ask my husband, 'What do you like more, me or AmEx?' Because if I eat his food every day, I have to buy new clothes."

The "Maria Menu" is one of the restaurant's assets. Nineteen dollars for three courses, it's also one of the city's best lunch bargains. There are two choices per course. I can vouch for the asparagus puree poured over an island of burrata set off with tiny spears of asparagus and the perfect steamed snapper. The centerpiece looks regal with a dusting of fennel pollen but is lessened by the Meyer lemon sauce on the side; the too-tart moistener is a distraction. The third course makes up for it. A dome of sparkling strawberry granita over a center of creamy olive oil gelato sends me back to the office on a sigh. Who says light has to taste lite?

If you like ice creams and sorbets, this is your dessert playground; another score is lemon verbena ice cream draped with passion fruit sauce and supported with perfect raspberries. Bomboloni, Italy's answer to doughnuts, are filled here with ricotta and presented in a box with jars of sauces and long spoons for reaching every drop. Yet the plate of elegant one-bite confections that end a meal speaks more to the talent in Fiola's pastry department, Jason Gehring, who comes here from the excellent Charleston in Baltimore.

It's possible to dine very well here. It's also possible to leave wondering how so many good intentions result in some routine moments. The chef seems to have his heart in another, earlier establishment.

Every bit as esteemed as a Richard or an O'Connell, Trabocchi is an adornment for the Washington restaurant scene. Fiola, in contrast, has yet to impress in the same way.