

VIVO! REVIEW

BY TOM SIETSEMA, THE WASHINGTON POST

AT IT'S PEAK, ROBERTO DONNA'S IL RADICCHIO CHAIN INCLUDED FIVE RESTAURANTS WHERE DINERS COULD MIX AND MATCH PASTA AND SAUCE WITHOUT BREAKING THE BANK. TODAY, ONLY THE CAPITOL HILL AND ARLINGTON PLACES SURVIVE; THE GEORGETOWN SPOT STANDS EMPTY WHILE THE BRANCHES IN DUPONT CIRCLE AND OLD TOWN FAIRFAX HAVE BEEN SHUTTERED AND REOPENED AS NEW RESTAURANTS. RECENTLY, I VENTURED OUT TO SAMPLE THE LAST TWO, BOTH OF WHICH RETAINED AN ITALIAN ACCENT IN THE TRANSITION.

"I WANT TO LICK THE PLATE," MY FRIEND WHISPERS ACROSS THE TABLE AT VIVO!, WHICH OPENED IN NOVEMBER, STILL A MEMBER OF THE DONNA EMPIRE. TOO BAD MY PAL'S ORDER OF CREAMY POLENTA, ENRICHED WITH MELTED, MILDLY NUTTY FONTINA CHEESE AND SET OFF WITH A PERFECT POACHED EGG, IS OUT OF MY REACH, OR HE'D HAVE SOME COMPETITION. BUT I AM BUSY CARVING INTO A ROTISSERIE CHICKEN; SCENTED WITH GARLIC AND ROSEMARY AND PARTNERED WITH DELICIOUS WRINKLED ROAST POTATOES AND A FLUFF OF GREENS, THE BIRD IS VANISHING BEFORE HIS EYES. THIS IS THE KIND OF DEEPLY SATISFYING ITALIAN COOKING TURNED OUT BY I MATTI CHEF IVAN ESCOBAR THAT KEEPS PEOPLE PACKED IN LIKE LIFESAVERS ON A SATURDAY NIGHT.

I WAS EAGER TO EMBRACE VIVO!; ITS STRETCH OF DUPONT CIRCLE DESPERATELY NEEDS A RESTAURANT WHOSE COOKING DOESN'T TASTE LIKE IT CAME OUT OF A PACKAGE. STILL, LIKE THE DATE WHO ASKS FOR YOUR NUMBER BUT THEN FAILS TO CALL, THIS SPARE STOREFRONT CAN BE UNPREDICTABLE. ONE DAY, I RETURNED TO THE OFFICE RAVING ABOUT THE LUSTY, HOUSE MADE PORK SAUSAGE, ARRANGED AROUND WILTED FRESH SPINACH; THE NEXT VISIT I AM APOLOGIZING TO MY GUEST FOR ITS SALTINESS. ANCHOVIES SPREAD WITH PARSLEY SAUCE TASTE AS IF THEY, TOO, PASSED THROUGH A SALT MINE ON THEIR WAY TO THE TABLE, WHILE RAVIOLINI STUFFED WITH ROASTED MEAT AND VEGETABLES GO DOWN BOTH TOUGH AND DULL. A SPECIAL OF SAFFRON TINGED RISOTTO WITH GRILLED SHRIMP ARE DECENT ENOUGH, BUT AT \$21.95, I WANT A BETTER STORY TO BRING HOME—THE KIND OF STORY I GET LATER, IN A LUNCH OF HAND MADE AGNOLOTTI, LIGHT PILLOWS OF PASTA FATTENED WITH SPINACH AND RICOTTA IN A LOVELY, SMOOTH MASCARPONE CREAM SAUCE.

THERE'S MORE TO ADMIRE. VIVO! IS AMONG A HANDFUL OF PLACES I THINK ABOUT WHEN I AM HUNGRY FOR BLISTERED, THIN CRUSTED PIZZA FROM A WOOD STOKED OVEN (AN OVEN THAT BRIGHTENS THE SETTING WITH ITS FLAMES). I'D ALSO HEAD IN THIS DIRECTION FOR A GRILLED LAMB STEAK, THIN BUT SUCCULENT AND ACCENTED WITH OREGANO AND GARLIC. MINISTRONE, A SOUP OF THE DAY, BUT ITS DEEP, SLANTED YELLOW BOWL IS SO ATTRACTIVE, I START RETHINKING MY KITCHENWARE. WHO CARES IF ELVIS IS SINGING IN THE BACKGROUND? THE WALLS SHOWCASE A CHANGING DISPLAY OF ORIGINAL ART AND THE WAITERS ENDEAR THEMSELVES WITH THEIR GRACIOUSNESS, EVEN WHEN THE COURSES ARE SLOW COMING TO THE TABLE. GIVE ME SOME MORE OF THAT EGG TOPPED POLENTA, AND VIVO! STARTS LIVING UP TO ITS TRANSLATION: ALIVE!

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