

Dining Out

Raymond M. Lane

Beautiful platters for beautiful people

Italian delicacies and ambience rule at D.C.'s Ciao Baby

Is it me or is Ciao Baby really as cool as it looks? Certainly from L Street the presentation comes across as impossibly romantic. Floor-to-ceiling windows open in fair weather to display both the little bar out front and a clutch of tiny tall tables set up just above the sidewalk outside. It's kind of living theater, the kind you can eat.

And what about all the beautiful people posing at those windows? I'm thinking of the leggy women on high stools at the tall tables, their delicate raisings and lowerings of food practically a parody of grazing gazelles.

Plenty of beautiful young men go there, too. Last week one beauty balanced a book on one knee — I swear it was Hemingway — with a stemmed glass with red wine gently counterbalanced on the other. He was sleek as an otter, sporting tiny tortoise shell glasses, and wore a svelte yellow sweater under Brooks Brothers tweed.

I could have strangled him on the spot for sheer envy.

There's lots more show biz inside, starting just beyond the bar where one wall is given to the display of antipasti romano. That's the way they do it in Rome, conspicuously displaying platters and bowls heaped with cold pastas and warm grilled vegetables, stacks of sliced meats, shimmering cheeses, heaps of tuna and beans, slabs of pizza, sweating melons and honeysuckles.

You can smell these beauties as soon as you walk by the front. The fresh basil atop tomato salad with pine nuts and balsamic vinegar, the reek of garlic from the kitchen, the succulence of come-have-lunch-now, you deserve all this.

Beyond the antipasti wall is a big fat dining room roaring with lunch-time visitors. It's a compelling social landscape of the nation's capital, complete with power women in twos and fours over sparkling water, quietly confident at their meal.

Louder senior partners, male and tan, whoop it up in larger groups. They buy the bottles of wine. Stray couples and junior partners flesh out the place. It's all Washington yack, as the coolly efficient wait staff laces the room with ribbons of glorious, delicious aromas.

Ah, that's Italian.

Or so it seems, even if the



place is one of three American restaurants based out of Cincinnati. By any measure, they've got the logic and looks down cold. Ciao Baby is exactly what you find in Milan or Rome when the big boys of law and commerce head out for chow.

Certainly, this cunning imitation of things Italian carries the burden of appearing insincere, a mass-produced thing. But then, so's a Mercedes.

The trick for diners is to learn how to drive Ciao Baby. The hungry unsophisticate might go once around the Beltway of the antipasti table, where \$11.95



Chef Jeffrey Myers shows off two of the house favorites: pan-seared salmon (left) and a tuna tartar with avocados and red peppers.



Ciao Baby is what you would find in Milan or Rome when the big boys of law and commerce head out for chow. Photos by Karen Boland/The Washington Times

buys unlimited eats. The pasta is a bit dull, but pizza is zesty. Tomatoes and cheeses and tuna and beans are lively and flavorful. Grilled vegetables are just perfect, but the bread is lifeless.

So throw on a glass of Sicilian white wine, and the thing works just fine.

For faster-paced enjoyment, explore the menu. Eggplant torte, \$7.95, might make a light meal. It's a little jewel of velvety grilled eggplant and a slab of spicy lamb sausage sauced with basil pesto and three cheeses. Too bad the house bread isn't fuller, more toothsome. A good loaf paired with this appetizer would make a memorable lunch.

Indeed, all the appetizers — from prosciutto and melon, grilled mushrooms, artichoke crostini, tuna tartar, and mozzarella and tomatoes — are flavorful and portioned just right for a small appetite. With maybe a cup of soup and a glass from the extensive Italian wine collection, you've got the makings of a lively exploration of Italian culinary delights.

But don't forget the cioppino, \$15.95. Yes, it's a fish soup/stew invented in San Francisco, and thus has no authentic claim on Italy — except that it's perfectly Italian, a fennel stew of scallops and hake, bits of vegetables and scent of fish broth and tomato.

So compelling is the dish, it has been successfully introduced back to Italy from San Francisco, where the knowledgeable diner understands well that here is Italy's clever response to the French *bourride* and *bouillabaisse*. And Ciao Baby's bowl stacks up well against anything on either side of the Atlantic.

Memorable, too, is herbed grilled tuna, \$15.95. It's a beautiful hunk of tuna steak slathered with sun-dried tomato pesto — nice and zippy — then grilled to a crusty shell with a juicy interior. Red potatoes and roasted vegetables come along for the ride, and it is simply delicious.

Simple pizza, \$10.95, for what it's worth, is splendid. But then so is the chicken fennel salad, \$8.95, a goat cheese-stuffed chicken breast on a bed of yummy spinach and pine nuts. Arugula salad tossed with

pancetta and sun-dried tomatoes with roasted potatoes, \$8.95, is perfect and alluring, again a small meal loaded with complex and hearty flavors.

For sure, Ciao Baby is an American place.

It sits on the exact spot where for 50 years a mom-and-pop, meatball-and-red-sauce spaghetti parlor stood. Purists may view Italian cooking as some kind of holy writ. But the beauty of America is that both kinds of restaurants work well, giving pleasure to those who take the trouble to walk through the door.

At Ciao Baby, the pleasure is never expressed better than at the end of the meal. Desserts in every guise are luscious, everything chocolate, the fresh berries, the knockout *creme brulee*, *tira misu* and deathless lemon tart.

Whatever brings you to such a restaurant, remember, *ciao* means both hello to new ideas and goodbye to the old.

IF YOU GO

RESTAURANT: Ciao Baby, 1736 L St. NW, Washington; 202/331-1500.

HOURS: Monday-Thursday, 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m.; Friday, 11:30 a.m. to 10:30 p.m.; Saturday, 5 to 10:30 p.m.; Sunday 5 to 9 p.m.

PRICES: Appetizers \$6.95-\$11.95, entrees, \$9.95-\$16.95. Wine by the glass starting at \$3.95.

CREDIT CARDS: All major cards.