

Oh-my-God moments at Cibo

■ **TRATTORIA** Revitalized Italian cooking brings out bliss and shows off taste of local ingredients

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RESTAURANT CRITIC

Recently, I wrote about the hot action around Trattoria Italian Kitchen on West Fourth, where really good-deal meals and super-friendly service created bonfires of excitement inside the room and out the door.

And now there's Cibo in the Moda Hotel, another great little trattoria. It's part of a welcome resurrection of French and Italian food in the city, and these cuisines have returned in better form than ever. The focus is on fabulous local ingredients and cooking that opens up their inner beauty. That's always been the way in Italy, and now it's the way of the revitalized Italian food here.

Cibo is a little more "downtown-y" and refined — and, certainly, more expensive — than Tratat Italian Kitchen (although still casual).

My first visit was just after its quiet opening, and it needed more buzz. The joint was not jumping.

"Maybe a reviewer will come in," a hotel guest said to the hostess as she checked out the place for dinner later. (That was the one time I really wanted to out myself as a critic, since a neighbouring diner was going on and on about how all restaurant critics are fat. "I'm a Size 2," I wanted to inform Ms. Know-It-All. But I digress.)

On a later visit to Cibo, we blissed out over many of the dishes. The chef, Neil Taylor, obviously takes pride in what he does. (He has cooked at the celebrated River Cafe in London, where Jamie Oliver was discovered and where fresh, vibrant ingredients are most important.)

Taylor's skill showed in the first food to hit the table, the bread. (Actually, it was ciabatta.) It was oh-my-God delicious. A nice crunch to the crust, tall and spongy inside. It came with excellent olive oil. Of course, I was nearly full by the time I finished half the basket, but, my goodness, was it ever worth it.

Another surprise was the calf's liver. I normally take a wide detour around it, thanks to having been tortured with it as a kid. But this was good, its mild flavour enhanced with pancetta.

"Silk pasta sheets" with yellow beans, potatoes and pesto took pasta to another level. It really was sheer, like silk.

Another pasta, lobster tagliatelle, featured lovely noodles, but the lobster was tough.

"Smashed" heirloom tomato and basil salad was transcendent. It was perfectly seasoned with quality salt —

so good, in fact, that I tipped the bowl, glug-glugging the remaining juices, cutting loose from civilized behaviour.

Prawn *brodo* (broth) was delicate and featured very fresh prawns.

My seared scallops were large and plump and fine but didn't distinguish themselves.

And I've never been infected by the eagerness for stuffed zucchini flower (with ricotta, in this case). Although it's fun to cook with a large flower blossom, the result is too limp and lame. I can't say it was any different here. I'd rather it were stuffed with something sturdier.

Char-grilled leg of lamb with potato, artichoke, leek, fennel and salsa verde was delicious, and I liked the rustic offering of baked ling cod with potatoes, olives, capers, majoram and lemon.

Desserts were a pleasure. Chocolate Nemesis is a mousse morphing into a ganache; the lemon tart is expertly made, albeit a recurring dessert in many restaurants.

Sebastien Le Goff is the man behind Cibo; he also runs the smart little wine bar, Uva, on the other side of the hotel.

(Actually, Moda Hotel is bursting with designer food and wine. You could easily become weak-kneed over at Viti Wine and Lager Store, next door to Cibo. It has 150 imported beers, endless whiskies and a serious selection of wines. My guy left with bags clinking with bottles of Belgian beers.)

Cibo features many of these delicious beers, as well as a choice list of Italian wines, backed by some bottles of B.C. wine and a stellar selection of prosecco and other Italian bubbly (more than 30 offerings).

The coffee's worth mentioning too. It's incredibly good!

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■ CIBO

Overall: ★★★★★

Food: ★★★★★

Ambience: ★★★★★

Service: ★★★★★

CIBO. 900 Seymour St. 604-602-9570. www.modahotel.ca. Open Monday to Saturday for dinner.

Restaurant visits are conducted anonymously and interviews are done by phone. Restaurants are rated out of five stars.



Sahara Tamarin shows off the seared scallops with organic baby beetroots and leeks available at the newly opened Cibo on Seymour Street in Vancouver. WARD PERRIN / VANCOUVER SUN