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## Cibo Matto raises stakes on great Italian food

August 28, 2009

BY PAT BRUNO

Cibo Matto, which is located on the second floor of the Wit Hotel (corner of State and Lake) in the Loop, has been rocking from the day it opened some seven weeks ago. And rocking as Cibo Matto is, The Roof -- an indoor/outdoor lounge on the 27th floor of the hotel -- is off the charts when it comes to a gathering of the cool, chic and see-me set.

Cibo Matto (translation: "crazy food") is overall a good dining room. Nothing over the top, it's just pleasantly casual, low-key sophisticated. The vibe is good.

And the food is excellent. Chef Todd Stein is at the helm, and he has fashioned a menu of Italian dishes that are approachable, carefully done and simply delicious. Stein has a knack for punching up flavor (I saw this often when he was at MK on North Franklin) without sending the dish flying out of the ring. For example, the grilled octopus appetizer in which the octopus was paired with fingerling potatoes (nothing new). When the tender octopus (first poached, then grilled to perfection) arrived all dressed up with a "salad" of frisee and celery and a painting of salsa verde on the plate, it was wonderfully surprising -- and good.

I had similar thoughts about the *fior di zucca*. This appetizer, a classic this time of year, when zucchini blossoms are abundant, is so simple to create, but in the wrong hands it can be a disaster. Nothing went wrong here. Two blossoms got stuffed with a creamy mixture of whipped and herbed-up ricotta before going through a gentle deep-frying to crisp the outside. Delicious. And the arugula pesto and fried parsley tagging along sounded just the right added note. A treasure trove of flavors and textures.

Burrata, the cheese that has taken the country by storm, showed up all creamy and loose. This combination of fresh mozzarella and cream arrived with a toupee of frisee and wild arugula, silky slices of nectarines and a small puddle of almond pesto. Frankly, I would have preferred that it be a little less gussied up, but that did not derail its flavorful triumph.

Four pasta dishes are listed on the menu and, frankly, I could have gone with any of them. But it was the house-made ravioli (five to a serving) that got my attention. The wrapper was so thin you could almost see the ricotta and garden pea filling inside. The ravioli, along with a scattering of fresh shelled peas and marinated tomatoes, brought the dish into an Eden of taste and texture that made me wish there had been five more.

Two *secondi*, or entrees (two announced daily specials are usually seafood-oriented), plucked out of the six listed did not disappoint one bit. "Trota" was an incredibly fine dish. The fillets of trout, squeaky fresh, seared on one side, could not have been cooked more on point. Delightfully delicious on their own, the fillets arrived in the pleasing company of small bits of Tuscan kale, a few crispy potatoes, a curl of zucchini and a dabble of basil, comprising a well-balanced dish.

Right up there in enjoyment with the trout was the *costolette*. Costolette in the Cibo Matto interpretation involves a "block" of braised short rib that held its shape but gave way with just a gentle prod of my fork. The tender meat had a rich, deep flavor, and a beefy sheen from the natural juices. A restrained dabble of mirepoix on top and a luscious mound of ricotta creamed spinach alongside a simple cut of meat ended up being pure magic.

The desserts were no less magical thanks to executive pastry chef Tina Blanco. Two not to miss would be the Mascarpone semifreddo and the hazelnut mocha cake. Not much can go wrong when the cylinder of semifreddo (literally, "half-frozen") gets wrapped with crushed pistachios and a crunchy almond phyllo that sort of snuck in around the bottom. The mocha cake was a delicious work of chocolate art made up of geometric pieces of layer cake, light and lusciously chocolaty and all glazed up with more chocolate and a hazelnut flavor coming through with a boost from *tuaca* (an Italian liqueur). Outstanding, as was the free shot of limoncello at the end.

Pat Bruno is a local free-lance critic and author. E-mail [brunoeats@aol.com](mailto:brunoeats@aol.com). Listen to Pat Bruno talk about food and wine Tuesdays at 6:23 p.m. and 10:23 p.m. and Saturdays and Sundays at 7:53 p.m. on WBBM News Radio 780-AM.