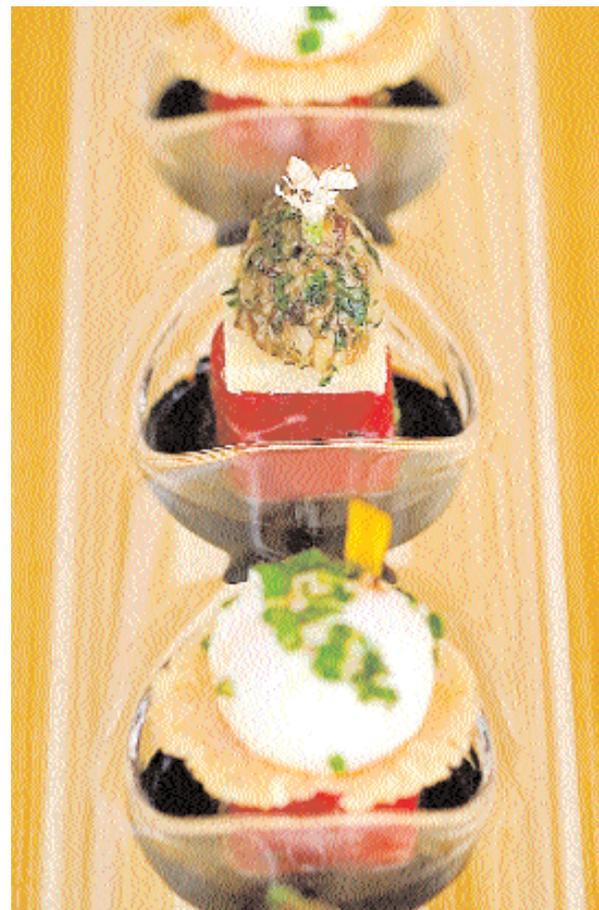




FOOD DRINK REVIEW

BY DAVE McINTYRE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DARKO ZAGAR



Maestro's luxurious dining room at the Ritz-Carlton Tysons Corner, left. The stunning presentation of Trabocchi's signature kobe beef carpaccio, above.

MASTER OF THE HOUSE *Five years as the critics' darling hasn't stopped Maestro's Chef Fabio Trabocchi from taking some risks and having some fun*

Mention Italian cuisine, and tofu usually doesn't come to mind. Nor do hay, or test tubes, or tweezers. Yet all these play prominent roles in a meal at Maestro and the whimsical, sometimes dazzling cuisine of Fabio Trabocchi.

Maestro has achieved iconic status since it opened five years ago in the Ritz-Carlton Tysons Corner with Trabocchi, an import from Le Marche in Italy by way of London, at the helm. The national food press—including *Esquire*, *Gourmet* and *Food & Wine*—have hailed the restaurant as one of the nation's best. Local media have placed it on the pinnacle of the area's dining scene. Last year, Maestro won awards from the Restaurant Association of Metropolitan Washington for Fine Dining Restaurant, Wine and Beverage Program and Chef of the Year. By the time you read this, the 32-year-old Trabocchi may have been crowned Best Chef in the Mid-Atlantic region at the annual James Beard Foundation Awards; he's earned his fourth consecutive nomination for the restaurant industry's equivalent of an Oscar.

The restaurant's aspirations are as high as its acclaim. Trabocchi's early resume includes stints at two Michelin-starred restaurants in Italy. Here his dining room combines Old World luxury and classic opera playing in the background with the open kitchen theater Americans have come to love and expect. It's more like a silent movie, actually—

there are no pots banging or chefs screaming, rather a well-choreographed waltz performed by Trabocchi's supporting cast, who communicate discreetly by headphones. The fleet of waiters, overseen by maitre d'hôtel Emanuele Fissore, anticipates your needs without encroaching on your meal, explains the food when necessary and occasionally offers the extra touch that can set a restaurant apart from its peers. You may be presented an amuse—a welcoming tidbit to spark the appetite—before seeing a menu, and most likely you'll be offered a choice of salted or unsalted butter for your bread.

You'll get a taste of Trabocchi's playfulness almost immediately. A vibrantly green fennel soup, compliments of the chef, arrives in a stoppered test tube, pointed at you like a cannon. The soup is a bracing palate cleanser; the presentation feels a bit awkward and silly in such formal surroundings. Relax, he seems to be saying, and enjoy the show.

The menu is divided into three acts. "Tradition" is Trabocchi's modernized take on Italian classics. "Evolution" presents his creative side with global ingredients and spices not commonly used in Italy. There is also a vegetarian menu, the "Colors of the Garden." Choosing from the varied selections can be a daunting task, and many diners opt to let Trabocchi fashion a tasting menu of three, five **CONTINUED...**

CONTINUED... or seven courses. It's a wise choice, and one can always ask for a specific dish to be included.

One dish that might be easy to overlook, but should not be missed, is smoked gnocchi with herbs, Parmigiano and lemon from the garden menu. Instead of boiling or baking the potatoes, Trabocchi smokes them over hay. This gives the dumplings an earthy flavor that seems too large for their small size, while the citrus in the sauce transports the dish to a different dimension. (The gnocchi reappear in another excellent, if less thrilling, treatment with diver scallops and fennel pollen.)

Trabocchi's other creations may have you humming your favorite arias. He updates carpaccio by wrapping strips of Kobe beef around tofu flavored with honey and lemon and props it in a puddle of aged balsamico. The visual reference is sushi, and you're presented giant silver-plated tweezers instead of chopsticks. A mosaic of crudo combines ahi tuna, nairagi (a type of marlin) and diced razor clams with chilies and a sorrel foam that echoes the sea. Foie gras is paired nicely, if conventionally, with duck confit and blood oranges. Braised veal cheeks offer a melt-in-your-mouth twist to osso buco, and seared Kobe beef sirloin, drizzled with aged balsamic vinegar and olive oil, is a simple yet sophisticated and delicious steak.

Rich compositions are sometimes undermined by too much salt in the execution, like a member of the chorus upstaging the impresario. Sausage-filled tortellini with roasted shallots and sherry are delicious, but the honey-barbera sauce strikes a discordant note. Wild sturgeon was unbearably salty when I had it; the accompanying foie gras and beet sauce lessened the misstep somewhat with their sweetness, but why not season each component individually to achieve balance in the whole?

Trabocchi takes risks as he tries to extract the maximum flavor from an ingredient, and sometimes he falls too close to a raw character rather than cooked. An arugula soup accompanying a wan parmesan flan and shredded

Sasseti Brunello di Montalcino. Letting Feraud choose wines to match Trabocchi's tasting menu enhances the drama and discovery in your meal.

For dessert, Maestro offers an impressive cheese selection, including some artisanal American cheeses, served appropriately with whole grain nut bread. And Trabocchi, whose first job was as a pastry chef, remains true to his roots with a pistachio soufflé with chocolate sorbet and a tiramisù playfully hidden in a crisp sugar box. Along with petit fours and madeleines, it's a parting present from a generous host.

Maestro is one of a handful of restaurants in the Washington area that provides the Michelin three-star experience, combining innovative cuisine, classic formal service and an extensive wine program in a luxury setting. Like the operatic theme it adopts, Maestro offers soaring melodies, and some dramatic tension, as it builds toward a rousing finish. ■

MAESTRO THE RITZ-CARLTON TYSONS CORNER, 1700 TYSONS BOULEVARD, MCGLEAN, 703.821.1515. **HOURS:** BREAKFAST, MON.–FRI., 6:30–11AM; DINNER, TUES.–THURS., 6–9PM, FRI., 6–9:30PM, SAT., 5–10PM; BRUNCH, SUN., 10:30AM–2:30PM. **WHO'S THERE:** DULLES CORRIDOR IT EXECs, BUSINESS TRAVELERS ON EXPENSE ACCOUNTS, JAMES BEARD AWARD JUDGES. **WHERE TO SIT:** FOR PRIVACY, ASK FOR AN ALCOVE. FOR PEOPLE WATCHING, NEAR THE WINDOWS. FOR THEATER AND TO CATCH A GLIMPSE OF THE CHEF, BY THE OPEN KITCHEN. **ABOUT THE WINE LIST:** DESIGNED FOR BIG SPENDERS AND EXPENSE ACCOUNTS, BUT DINERS SPLURGING ON A SPECIAL OCCASION DINNER WILL FIND SOME MODERATELY PRICED SELECTIONS. OUTSTANDING, IF PRICEY, SELECTION BY THE GLASS AND HALF-BOTTLE, ALONG WITH A LONG LIST OF AFTER-DINNER DRINKS. **ABOUT DESSERT:** ANYTHING CHOCOLATE IS A WINNER, AND THERE ARE SOME FRUIT DESSERTS FOR A FITTING END TO A LONG MEAL. **WHAT IT COSTS:** TASTING MENU, \$85–\$135; A LA CARTE, \$85–\$110; VEGETARIAN, \$125–\$150. **RATING:** ★★★★★

What the stars mean: 1 = fair, some noteworthy qualities; 2 = good, above average; 3 = very good, well above norm; 4 = excellent, among the area's best; 5 = world-class, extraordinary in every detail. Reviews are based on multiple visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambiance and service.

YOU'LL GET A TASTE OF TRABOCCHI'S PLAYFULNESS ALMOST IMMEDIATELY. A VIBRANTLY GREEN FENNEL SOUP ARRIVES IN A STOPPERED TEST TUBE, POINTED AT YOU LIKE A CANNON ... RELAX, HE SEEMS TO BE SAYING, AND ENJOY THE SHOW.

romaine lettuce tastes too much of the garden—or perhaps the yard. A bean soup served with sunny-side-up duck eggs, also on the vegetarian menu, was unnecessarily bitter and, once again, too heavily salted.

Scottish langoustines, however, are simply what shellfish were meant to be. Trabocchi gets them rarely, at most once a week, usually Wednesday or Thursday, and only in colder weather when the shellfish is at its best. He treats them simply—split lengthwise and browned under a broiler until they are barely cooked, then dusted with chile powder to balance the sweetness of the flesh. This dish is worth calling ahead to see if it's on the menu. Then rearrange your schedule and go.

Sommelier Vincent Feraud knows his way around a wine cellar, having worked previously at Jean-Louis at the Watergate and Lespinasse at The St. Regis Hotel in DC. His list at Maestro is especially deep in French, Italian and American wines, with emphases on Bordeaux, Burgundy, Tuscany and Napa. The heavy hitters are here, including Mouton-Rothschild 1982 (\$2,150) and four vintages of Harlan Estate (\$450–\$700). Yet Feraud is not too proud even in this posh a setting to put a common supermarket label, Jaboulet's Parallele 45 2001, on the list for \$28. "It's good wine," he explains.

Perhaps more importantly for a menu as varied and rich as Maestro's, Feraud offers more than 25 wines by the glass and 45 by the half bottle (plus more dessert wines). These are not throw-away wines either. The by-the-glass selection includes Domaine Weinbach Riesling and Livio



Chef Fabio Trabocchi at work in his kitchen