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Toscana Café chef/owner Daniele Catalani showcases dishes from his native Tuscany. Photo: Andrew Lightman

Toscana Café

Tuscan Charm near Union Station

BY CELESTE MCCALL



Served with a robust tomato sauce, osso bucco (veal shank) is a favorite fall dinner entree. Photo: Andrew Lightman

Thanks to the Toscana Café, diners may now savor the robust cooking of Tuscany on Capitol Hill. Situated at the corner of Second and F streets NE, the appealing newcomer debuted in early August and is quickly gaining a loyal clientele. Created by Florentine-born Daniele Catalini, who once wielded his whisk at the late Galileo, Toscana settled into the space vacated by Banducci, across the street from Ebenzer's Coffeehouse. Blue umbrellas mark the café's outdoor patio, where picnic tables seat about three dozen. Above, the red-white-and-green Italian flag flaps in the breeze alongside Old Glory. Open for dinner Monday through Saturday, for now, Toscana's lunch is carryout only, which is fine with harried workers from the nearby Supreme Court, Senate office buildings and the SEC. Later on, Catalani might add sit-down lunch and weekend service.

"We are so happy to come to your neighborhood," said Catalani, who lives in Adams Morgan with his wife Vicki and 3-month old daughter Anna Bella. "You have been most welcoming, and we are glad to be able to come here and provide a service."

Catalani, now 32, arrived in the United States 20 years ago, and soon joined Roberta Don-

na's Galileo. At the tender age of 23, he advanced to executive chef. After Galileo folded, Catalani became top toque for Extra Virgin (Shirlington Village, Arlington) and later at Panache, at Tysons Corner.

Why open his own business on Capitol Hill? "We thought this neighborhood needed a good Italian restaurant," Catalani explained. "And we like the neighborhood."

Dinner is served upstairs in the nicely appointed space punctuated by antique photos and a colorful tapestry depicting Florence. Tables are topped with cobalt-blue tiles. Toscana's happy hour goes from 5 to 7 p.m. weeknights.

On a recent evening, we ran into U.S. Sen. Bob Corker (R-Tenn.) dining with his staff and constituents. They were attracted by the area's ample parking (at night – in the day parking is hard to come by). Corker and his entourage loved the food.

At that same repast, we sat outdoors. We ordered braised baby octopus with olives and chickpeas in a rich tomato sauce, which we sopped up with crusty bread. A generous portion of pappardelle (wide fettuccine) was tossed with lamb ragu. Gnocchi (potato dumplings) were combined with shrimp and sundried potatoes sauced with basil pesto. Everything is made from scratch, we're told, including pastas, bread and desserts. Buffalo mozzarella comes from Puglia, Italy every Thursday. Prices are right; entrees keep to the high teens. Dinner for two with wine came to \$75, including tax and tip.

Except for Barracks Row's reliable Trattoria Alberto, and Bistro Italiano on D St. NE, Capitol Hill suffers from a shortage of Italian restaurants. Toscana is helping to fill the gap.

Toscana is at 601 Second St. NE, open daily for lunch, 11:30 a.m.-3 p.m.; dinner, 6-10 p.m.; closed Sunday. 202-525-2693. www.toscanacatering.com. ★



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