



SMALL PLATES, BIG FLAVOR Clockwise from far left: The wood-topped bar at Riccardo Enoteca; vegetables fresh from the oven; the wood-burning oven in action; chef/owner Riccardo Michi; a sampling of pizzas

A Simple Plan

An Italian wine bar in Lincoln Park is a welcome addition to the neighborhood.

| By Michael Nagrant |
| Photography by Anthony Tablier |

Riccardo Trattoria has long been a favorite of true-blue Lincoln Parkers and the food-obsessed from around the city who cherish the spot for its small and boisterous dining room and traditional yet innovative cuisine. So when owner Riccardo Michi decided to open a tiny wine bar across the street, we—and plenty of others—were interested.

With just 45 seats, Riccardo Enoteca is much more intimate than its older sibling—think of it as a great place to grab a casual dinner with friends or a relaxed and fun first-date spot. The menu is significantly smaller, too, with sections such as salads, pizza, panini and items from the wood-burning oven, including eggplant with Parmesan and oven-grilled mixed Italian sausage—most of which are served small-plate style. Italian wines dominate the list, but there are also ones from other popular grape-friendly countries, such as France and Argentina. Beer and cocktails are available as well.

Though it's much more laid-back—the minimal and quite basic interior design adds to that vibe—than its sister spot, there's nothing casual about the service at Enoteca. The dark-haired waiters and food runners (pretty much all possessing slicked-back hair and crisp white shirts, looking like extras from *Goodfellas*) are doting. A plate, even an empty one, never gets removed from the table without permission, wine glasses are always full and, if you leave the table, napkins are refolded.

And you can bet, almost all the plates are empty, scraped clean with the soft golden focaccia served in

the house bread basket. The pizzas, which incorporate a Milanese-style focaccia crust, have crackling edges and a range of creative toppings. On the evening I dined at Enoteca, my favorite was the Capesante drizzled with lobster bisque, wispy slivers of tender scallop, zucchini and pieces of smoky bacon. (Sounds strange, tastes great.) But be warned: This particular ingredient combo may or may not be available since Riccardo serves a menu of daily specials that's almost as large as the regular one, and a good bit of it turns over weekly. Other daily specials might include grilled asparagus with fontina fondue and a fried egg. (Want a preview? The specials menu is available on Enoteca's website and is updated daily.)

But don't let all these specials recommendations worry you: The regular menu holds its own, too. Grilled octopus with garlicky pesto nestled in a mound of crushed potatoes, aka the Octopus Genovese, is soothing comfort food. Scrims of smoked pink tuna, topped with a salad of peppery arugula, orange and fennel bursting with citrus and licorice, make a nice palate-cleansing intermezzo. Pizzas always on the menu include Fugazetta with braised onions, sausage, mozzarella and provolone, or the Bianca, with smoked salmon, stracchino, capers and onions.

Enoteca's lasagna Bolognese from the *Forno a Legna* ("wood-burning oven") section offers tender bits of browned beef coated with a light touch of tomato ragout sandwiched between al dente pasta coated with nutty béchamel. This dish is a reminder that real lasagna is not a pasta brick sogged with cloying Prego and glops of ricotta.

Heavy food however is welcome during dessert, especially with Enoteca's *paciugo* (Italian for messy concoction), a sundae of silky vanilla gelato, hand-whipped cream, bursting berries and amaranthe-soaked cherries. It's simple, perfect and rewarding, which is to say, much like Enoteca itself.

Riccardo Enoteca

2116 N. Clark St.,
773.549.5010

Open for dinner nightly

Dealmakers

Smoked tuna carpaccio.....\$8

Lasagna classica Bolognese.....\$14

Paciugo.....\$8

