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The Ruggeri family's newest Bice Bistro doesn't quite live up to its reputation

By [Charles Ferruzza](#)

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Despite the shaky economy, new restaurants continue to open in the Power & Light District, and that's a good thing. What I keep waiting for is the day when a great restaurant opens in this expensively mounted complex of dining and drinking establishments. Except for the Bristol Seafood Grill, which is beautifully decorated and has a first-rate menu, the P&L District's offerings have mostly underwhelmed me.

My highest hopes were for **Bice Bistro**, the first Kansas City branch for the Milan-based Ruggeri family's Bice Group. More than a decade ago, I ate a wonderful meal in the first Bice to open stateside, the New York City location on East 54th Street. That's where I learned that the name of the clean, cool Adam Tihany-designed restaurant was pronounced *bee-chay* and was a nickname for the restaurant empire's founder, Beatrice Ruggeri. Her first restaurant, *il Ristorante Da Gino e Bice*, opened in Milan in 1926. By the late '70s, her sons Remo and Roberto had expanded the company to Sardinia and then, in 1987, to New York. The Bice Group now has 10 Bice restaurants in the United States plus five locations for the Bice Bistro, which is a more modestly priced stepchild of the original brand.

I've now made three trips to Kansas City's Bice Bistro, once for lunch and twice for dinner. The dining room is quite handsome, the serving staff is attractive and, in the case of acerbic waiter Bill Johnson (who has schlepped plates at practically every restaurant in town), is also able to put on a hilarious walking floor show. But the food is unspectacular.

A recent caller to the restaurant critic's panel on KCUR 89.3's *Walt Bodine Show* dissed Bice's cuisine as "extremely pedestrian." That's a little harsh, although the bowl of fresh linguini I tasted on my third visit, tossed with a stingy portion of *aglio e olio* (garlic and olive oil) wasn't even pedestrian; it was almost inedible. While other far more appealing dishes have elevated Bice in my view, I don't think it holds a votive candle to chef J.J. Mirabile's elegant Italian fare at Jasper's or even the unpretentious but lusty Italian-American dishes at Joe Accurso's joint at 50th Street and Main.

"Still, would you go there again?" asked my friend Truman, knowing that I've been uninspired to return to many of the P&L restaurants after writing about them. In the case of Bice, yes, I would go back. Unlike the noisier restaurants in the Kansas City Live! block, Bice Bistro is just far enough from the outdoor stage area that it's possible to have an intimate conversation in the ground-level dining room. And while the ambience isn't formal, there is a sense of quiet sophistication and distinctive style. The P&L venue also includes a beautiful rooftop lounge, directly under the clock tower, and a small café that sells, a manager told us, a lot of lunches and takeout meals to the office workers in the area.

I was most interested in the main dining room, a cream-colored space with sleek two-toned wood floors and poster-sized acrylic panels silkscreened with iconic Italian film stars: Sophia Loren, Marcello Mastroianni, Giulietta Masina. Sunny, yellow-cloth napkins accent the uncloaked tables, and visual presentations are exquisite — even a basket of rustic breads arrives with a tiny frosted-glass dish boasting a dollop of soft ricotta blended with cream cheese and an olive tapenade in a puddle of balsamic vinegar.

Marie, Jason and I had been seated in a pretty little banquette in the main room (the outdoor tables were all full) with a good view of that night's patrons. The closest thing to celebrity sightings: a high-powered tobacco attorney and his gorgeous wife — sitting outside so he could smoke expensive cigars — and the good-looking managers, who all seemed to be wearing tailored Italian suits.

We started the meal with carpaccio because Marie wanted it. I've always thought that this Italian delicacy of raw beef filet shaved to tissue-paper thickness was so damn difficult to pry off the plate that it was hardly worth the effort, but my companions thought it was *molto* delicious. It would have been even better served with that basket of bread, but our server apparently didn't think of that until much later. By that time, I was nearly finished with a robust cup of minestrone with fresh vegetables and a soothing broth. We shared the *barbabietole* salad. (The Italian word is such a tongue-twister, why not just call it what it is: a beet salad with pine nuts, spinach, orange zest and a light, fresh-tasting lemon truffle dressing?)

On the subject of lemon: The server who brought my midmeal cup of espresso might have thought to bring a twist with the beverage, but he was clearly preoccupied — and not with us. Fortunately, our feelings of neglect were cured by dinner: a gorgeous, slow-braised lamb shank osso buco for Jason and a rich, creamy risotto con aragosta, loaded with lobster and baby spinach, for Marie — it was one of the most decadent things I've tasted in a long time.

I was wanting something simple, so the server suggested the capellini with freshly made mozzarella, chopped tomatoes and fresh basil. How a dish that sounds so wonderful could turn out so flavorless, I have no idea, but it was the night's one true clinker. A silky Grand Marnier crème brûlée might have improved my mood, but I couldn't taste a hint of the orange-flavored liqueur in the chilled custard. Equally disappointing was the cioccolatismo, a hot, gooey chocolate pastry (Bice's version of the "molten chocolate cake" that's becoming so trendy) that looks and tastes like something I used to make in my sister's Easy-Bake Oven.

A couple of weeks later, I had a late dinner with Truman and Bob after a lecture at the Central Library. We shared a wonderful thin-crust pesto pizza with shrimp and goat cheese, and Bob loved his fettuccine carbonara made with lots of cream and egg yolk. But this was also the night that I had the dreadful pasta *aglio e olio* (I ate lots of bread instead). Truman, meanwhile, raved over his spaghetti al cartoccio, a mound of sauteed pasta tossed with mussels, scallops and shrimp, and a handful of spicy fresh arugula, rolled in a sheath of parchment and baked for a few minutes.

"I like it," he said, spearing a shrimp. "It has a little heat to it."

It was 9 p.m., and the dining room was nearly empty, so Bill Johnson entertained us with his biting, improvised monologue about living downtown.

"He's kind of bitchy, isn't he?" Truman whispered.

No, he's Bice. And definitely not pedestrian.