



Some chain and franchise restaurants make a virtue of their international identikit appeal. It's not so much a lack of character as the assurance that you'll get the same kind of experience anywhere you patronise the brand. It's the McDonald's message, and it works for both eater and vendor.

One of the tricks that BiCE pulls off is the way this chain brand (over 40 restaurants around the world) manages to feel like an independent with its own menu, its own atmosphere, and its own creative chef in the kitchen. Well, he is quite creative; and he is allowed to produce his own menu. But before arriving at BiCE Abu Dhabi he was at BiCE Barcelona, and clearly the group is keen to keep things in-house as it spreads its own message.

That is essentially Italian trattoria food with some interesting contemporary variations, presented in a slightly upmarket setting. There's real history to the name, too; BiCE (which is how the brand looks) is actually Bice, a pet name for Beatrice Ruggeri, who opened her trattoria in Milan in 1926. Her sons have subsequently built the brand, selling the idea of a friendly atmosphere and home cooking.

Amazingly, that's what you do get. It is the first floor of the Abu Dhabi Hilton, it is a big room, there are armies of waiting staff with imperceptibly varying specialisations, and a pianist tinkles away in the corner; but it's all cleverly arranged for a welcoming, quite cosy feel – even when the place isn't too full it doesn't feel empty.

The menu is long but good, varying from Angus beef at AED 200 to pizzas at AED 55. The bread comes with interesting dips rather than butter – pesto, tapenade, artichoke purée – and the starters were a meal in themselves. The calamari were entirely traditional, deep-fried in light batter, but came with three different sauces one of which had the required chilli kick. The crab cake was nothing like the Thai variety, instead arriving as a kind of hamburger with red pepper

sauce and avocado – a delicate taste if perhaps an over-large portion, but then the UAE's restaurants often like to err on the generous side.

Our main courses were also substantial. Lobster ravioli in a lobster bisque sauce was excellent, well-seasoned and wellbalanced. The pasta seemed a bit on the thick side, but lobster can sometimes seem just too rich and the extra heft countered that. A nice touch.

A saku tuna steak came rare, as recommended; saku is the top sashimi grade of tuna, the finest and most delicate available, and the fish just melted in the mouth. Not quite Italian enough? The breadcrumb-and-spice crust brought it back home, and so did the roasted mixed peppers.

We polled a couple of other tables, and risotto, ravioli and pizzas all got the people's vote.

What else do you have in an Italian restaurant to wrap things up? It had to be tiramisu – quite the tastiest and least teeth-grindingly sugary example we've had in the UAE – and pannecotta (a lovely piece of wobbly heaven with a terrific intense raspberry coulis) followed by thick espressos.

BiCE is the Italian restaurant of choice for many people in Abu Dhabi, and it's clear why. You get a good meal, great atmosphere, and nearly everything you want from a traditional trattoria. True, there are no opera-singing waiters; but yes, BiCE does have one of those one metre-long pepper grinders.

What? BiCE

Where? Hilton Abu Dhabi

Why? Ambiance, quality of the cooking, good value for going-out dining. The best Italian eatery in town?

Why not? It's basically an Italian trattoria with upmarket ambitions

How much? Around AED 200-240 exc drinks, but you could just have a pizza ...

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Add 10 percent sales tax and service charge to prices

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