

## Review: Café Cibo in St. Petersburg serves classic Italian with consistency you can count on

By [Jim Webster](#), Times Food Critic  
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Among Café Cibo's long list of classic Italian dishes are, clockwise from left, Bianco & Spinaci pizza, Antipasto della Casa, Lasagna di Casa, Caprese, Frutti di Mare and chicken Marsala. Sauces are satisfying, helpings are generous, and even desserts are housemade.



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ST. PETERSBURG • Sometimes it's all about geography. • In looking back at the restaurants I have written about in the past year, I noticed that there was a spot on the map that I hadn't hit: the north end of Fourth Street in St. Petersburg. So I kept a keen eye on the area, awaiting the opening of a new restaurant worth talking about. But the landscape was dotted with fast food, a few places that had been recently reviewed, and a couple that had been there a long time. • So what if it became about geography *and* longevity? There has to be a reason those restaurants that have been there a long time have made it this far.

Café Cibo opened in 1999. In the *St. Petersburg Times* review in 2000, then-food critic Chris Sherman was taken with the unique buttery-tomatoey dip that comes with the complimentary bread and the way his server deftly fielded his inquiry as to the quality of the tomatoes available that day for the Pomodoro e Cipolla, a salad of tomato, red onion, Gorgonzola and balsamic vinaigrette. His server thought it was a good question, she checked on the quality, reported that they looked good, he ordered and agreed. That's how you build trust.

When I went in for a visit, that condiment was still served with the bread, and it was still addictive. I thought I'd ask about the quality of the day's tomatoes in the Pomodoro e Cipolla. Our server went back to the kitchen and came back with a shrug. He thought it might be a good day to look at a different appetizer. And that's how we ended up with the antipasto platter (\$9.95), a nice selection of grilled and marinated vegetables, provolone and sopressata, a salami. Honestly advising what *not* to order is another great way to build trust.

Same test twice, a decade apart, and passed both times. Score one for consistency, too.

All well and good. But we came for pasta.

The menu is a long list of classics that are likely to generate leftovers. The house lasagna (\$11.95) has three cheeses and stars the house Bolognese sauce (more on that later). The gnocchi (\$12.95) is a generous plate of the potato dumplings tossed in marinara and covered in shredded ricotta salata cheese, a salty, tangy version of ricotta. The chicken cacciatore (\$14.95) included two large, lightly sauteed breasts with a sauce of tomatoes and mushrooms. Everything pretty much as you would expect to find it.

A plate of fettuccine Bolognese (\$12.95) is a thoroughly satisfying serving of pasta and sauce. But as a Bolognese, it seems a little interpretive. Ours had big chunks of meat. A classic Bolognese is long simmered with meat that isn't so much *in* that sauce as it *is* the sauce. Italian food is famous for house-to-house variations, so no one's ever really wrong, but this came across more as a meat sauce than the traditional sauce of meat.

Owner Frank Schittino, a first-generation American who spent his formative years in Baltimore, melds his lineage in a couple of dishes, most notably a crab ragu (\$14.95). Lump crab meat is simmered in tomato sauce and served over linguine. It's simple but tells Schittino's story pretty quickly. The sauce is light enough that the crab comes through, and it all works.

The hard sell at dessert time comes for the tiramisu (\$5.50). It hits all the benchmarks for the favorite, with a rustic look on the plate that assures you are under the roof where it was made.

There is something refreshing about the quintessential Italian neighborhood joint. You should be able to go into it knowing what to expect. The only surprises should be good ones. Do that, and you should be able to stay in business for decades.

There is evidence on the north end of Fourth Street.

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### Café Cibo

8697 Fourth St. N, St Petersburg;

(727) 579-1570; [cafecibo.com](http://cafecibo.com)

**Cuisine:** Italian

**Hours:** 11:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday, 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. Tuesday through Friday, 5 to 10 p.m. Saturday, 5 to 9 p.m. Sunday

**Details:** AmEx, V, MC, Discover

**Prices:** Entrees \$11 to \$18, appetizers

\$8 to \$10

**Rating out of four stars:**

Food: ★★★ Service: ★★ 1/2

Atmosphere: ★★ 1/2

**Overall: ★★★**