

At the Head of the Class

Biscotti, Four Seasons Hotel, Bangkok (Originally appeared in the *Royal Bangkok Sports Club Magazine*)

by Michael Moore

There is no shortage of Italian restaurants in Bangkok. At times it appears as if there are more Italian dining spots in the Big Mango than in Rome. The places range from humble trattorias operated by lone Italian expats to large restaurants with seemingly unlimited funds housed in international hotels. Although there are a few 'limones' in Bangkok's Italian food basket, the food in several of the places is as good as you will find anywhere outside of Italy.

The surfeit of Italian restaurants is good news for consumers. It not only makes for lots of choices, it also means the competition to be *numero uno* is intense, a condition that does wonders for quality. And nowhere is the competition to be king of the hill more intense than in the city's major hotels. These international leviathans do battle throughout the world and will do virtually anything to outdo one another. Fortunately for Italian food lovers, the battleground in Bangkok includes the numerous hotel based Italian restaurants. In addition to tossing tomato sauce, salamis, olive oil, and other imported ingredients at each other, weapons include attractive promotions and chefs with sterling Italian credentials eager to make a name for themselves. Biscotti at the Four Seasons Hotel has been at or near the head of the class for several years, an enviable record. Here is how they do it.



The Interior

Designed by famous Hong Kong interior designer Tony Chi, Biscotti has a 'no nonsense' style interior that combines functionality with a pleasing modern feel. The centerpiece of the design is the large open kitchen that allows patrons to watch their food being prepared and to enjoy all the wonderful smells that make the Italian cuisine famous. The restaurant seats about 100 people, including a 'chef's table' near the entrance seating eight and a communal table for ten that is ideal for those dining on their own. The chef's table is ideal for small gatherings of people especially interested in Italian food. There is a special menu with recommendations from the chef.

Place settings and cutlery at Biscotti are definitely not cut from the red and white checked tablecloth category. They reflect the best of modern Italian design and include simple white dishes and transparent apple green and cobalt blue pieces to add color and contrast.

Lunch

Unlike most of Bangkok's hotel Italian dining spots, Biscotti is popular at lunch. Its location

near the shopping and business center at the Rajadamri/Ploenchit intersection makes it ideal for power lunches or an escape from the rigors of shopping. The restaurant recognizes this as a weapon in its competitive arsenal and has responded with attractive lunchtime options.

For those in a hurry, the 'Express Lunch' is ideal. You visit the sumptuous antipasti table and then order main course to be brought to your table by one of the restaurant's efficient servers. If you are in the mood for a sweet, you can also order a dessert. The two-course meal is B690 and the three-course version B740 with both including coffee or tea. The main courses are constantly changing, reflecting what is in season. We recently enjoyed a *Red Snapper with Artichoke Fricassee and Spinach* and an *Italian Dome with Italian Lemon Sorbet* for dessert. If you are in the mood for focaccie or pizza, the offerings from the wood-fired oven are delicious. The pasta and risotto are also very attractive options for the lunchtime crowd.

Dinner

In the evening, Biscotti mellows out and life slows from the hectic pace of midday Bangkok. Biscotti's a la carte menu is dotted with traditional Italian favorites and contemporary items that show off the chef's creative skills. It is also a good time to sample some of the good wines from Biscotti's extensive wine list.

My favorite from the appetizers and salads section of the menu is the B480 Roasted Scallop and Porcini Salad. The ingredients are superb and it really tells in this remarkable dish. Another salad I heartily recommend is the B280 *Rocket Salad with Artichokes, Dried Cherry Tomatoes, 'Taggiasche' Olives and Shaved Parmesan*. If you are watching your waistline, get the large B340 version; it is a meal in itself.

I have also been partial to Biscotti's risotto over the years and thankfully Danilo Aiassa, the current chef, has maintained the high standards set by his predecessors. An excellent choice is the B390 *Risotto with Toasted Onion Cream and Brown Veal Sauce*; simple, yet redolent with Italian goodness, it never fails to please. If you have room for pasta, don't hesitate to try the B360 *Penne with Lamb Ragout*. Slightly chewy in texture, the penne is superb and the lamb ragout a fitting accompaniment.

The Fish and Meat section of the menu is relatively short, but includes several personal favorites. I love veal and always enjoy the B790 *Braised Veal Shank with Young Vegetables and Creamy Potatoes*. This 'stick to the rib' dish is made with quality veal and it shows. Another great choice is the B660 *Baked Red Snapper with Herbs, Capers, Potatoes and Cherry Tomatoes*. The Italians are good with fish and this is a classic example of what they can do. If you have a Thai in your dining party, they are likely to love this dish.

No Italian meal is complete without dessert and those offered at Biscotti are as good as I have found in Bangkok. The *Baba al Rhum Con Fantasia di Crème* – a soft baba soaked in aged rum syrup and served with cream and berry compote is worth writing home about. But so is the *Panna Cotta al Mango*, Italian cooked cream with fresh mango and crumbly shortbread with light verbena syrup, a delightful marriage of Italian and Thai ingredients.

The Chef

Make no mistake about it: the most important ingredient in an Italian meal is the chef. Italian food is a worldwide favorite and everyone seems to cook it. The result is a morass of dishes called 'Italian' that often bears little resemblance to the real thing. Biscotti has always avoided this problem by importing a chef with impeccable Italian connections. The current import is Danilo Aiassa from Carmagnola in the north of Italy near Torino.

Danilo started his formal culinary career at Restaurant Il Cambio in Torino, once a hangout for Cavour (Count Camillo Benso), one of the leaders in Italian unification. He then went to the three-star Michelin Dal Pescatore near Mantua as *comis de cuisine*. Then it was on to Bologna to work with two-star chef Valentino Marcattilli at San Domenico. He then honed his talents in French restaurants for several years, including a stint with famous chef Antoine Westermann at the three-star Buerheisl restaurant in Strasbourg. He then returned to San Domenico in his homeland to work as sous chef before coming to the Four Seasons in Bangkok, his first Asian venture.

Biscotti has been around for several years now. It has fought hard to maintain its position as one of the city's Italian restaurants. To see how the restaurant has maintained its dominance, drop in for a meal. A good way to try Biscotti is to first stop in for lunch to familiarize yourself with the restaurant and its menu. Then, when you have more time, come for an evening meal so that you can linger and enjoy a wider variety of food.

The Four Seasons Hotel is located on Rajadamri Road and Biscotti is open daily from 12.00-14.30 and 18.00-22.30. Conveniently located adjacent to the Radjamri Skytrain station, it also has plenty of onsite parking for those who choose to drive. The restaurant is popular so obtaining reservations by calling 02-250-1000 is a good idea