



More adventures in dining on MDI

In which I visit La Bella Vita and Rebird

by [Nan Lincoln](#)

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Both in my cooking at home and eating out, I tend to get into a rut. Making the same tried and true dishes for dinner, and choosing the same tried and true restaurants (Red Sky, Sips, McKays, Mache, Eden) for dining out. But this summer I've been pushed off that well-worn culinary path several times. First the nudges led me to discover the exciting new tastes and fun ambiances at Bassa in Northeast Harbor, Blame it on Rio in Southwest Harbor and the sumptuous, old world elegance of Xanthus, at the Clarendon Hotel. More recently I have stumbled upon the totally unexpected pleasures of La Bella Vita at the Harborside Hotel in Bar Harbor, and Red Bird in Northeast Harbor.

Actually, it was a failed attempt at getting into two of my favorite Bar Harbor haunts— Reel Pizza and Eden Vegetarian Café—that led me to Bella Vita. Having missed the movie and finding Eden full, my daughter and I decided to give this new Italian restaurant across West Street a whirl.



Sous Chef Roger Young at La Bella Vita, in Bar Harbor. [NAN LINCOLN](#) PHOTO

I confess it did not look all that promising at the start. The restaurant is located in a large pocket-shaped room off the main lobby of the imposing new Harborside Hotel, which had just received an influx of new guests, so it was pretty noisy and bustling. And while the restaurant ambience is clean, tasteful and attractive, it has more the look of a rather fancy, breakfast nook than an upscale Italian restaurant, with its bare topped tables and white, faux French Provincial chairs.

But there was nothing breakfasty or faux about the offerings on the large— about the size of the Ten Commandments actually— menu we were handed.

What to choose! Crispy calamari and zucchini Fritte, or brick oven Polpetta meatballs, or maybe crab and lobster fonduta, "mama's" handcrafted gnocchi, or Tuscan garlic prawns? And that was just for starters.

We "settled" for the calamari which was as light and crispy as promised and perfectly paired with an almost tempura-like fried zucchini; and the lobster ravioli— a gorgeous marriage of black squid pasta and a delicately flavored salmon-hued, creamy lobster paste with flecks of wilted spinach, served with tart, sundried tomatoes. Oh my.

For an Antipasto we lucked-out with our choice of Caprese Insalate, a plate-full of fat juicy slices of red and yellow tomato — firm and perfectly ripened— served with slices of fresh mozzarella, fresh basil and an excellent balsamic and olive oil reduction, then crowned with a little cube of honey comb that notched up the flavor of the tomatoes a few delicious decibels (I am going to steal this idea to perk up the flavor of my own garden's tomatoes). This left our palates all cleansed and

ready for the main courses.

Once again, what to choose—the halibut with clams, artichokes, capers and capellini; the seafood cioppino that looked on the page like a savory bouillabaisse; a yummy sounding chicken cacciatore with field mushrooms?

Well I couldn't resist the "Hand Trapped" jumbo Maine lobster oreganato, having grown weary of all those machine harvested



Red Bird Restaurant in Northeast Harbor

crustaceans the other restaurants serve. (Just kidding, as I am sure the menu writer was). So we could get that surf 'n turf experience, my daughter went with the Bella Filet trio — three tenderloins crusted with different "classic" Italian flavorings.

I am not generally a big fan of baked stuffed lobster, which can be dried out, and so loaded with breadcrumbs it begins to resemble a Thanksgiving turkey. But this baby was sweet and succulent with just enough garlic and oregano flavoring to suggest that this "hand trapped" Maine lobster could speak Italian. My only criticism was the rather wan looking and tasteless asparagus that accompanied it. With so many local vegetables in season, why go with something that has to make the long trip from New Zealand or Chile before it ends up on your grill? The beef filets were tender and tasty, and really were three different acts — one starring Portobello pesto, another gorgonzola (which I found a tad overwhelming) and parmegiano.

Dessert was a tiramisu that was so light I'm surprised it didn't float off the plate, and a chocolate budino, which reminded me of a steamed Christmas pudding, but chocolate instead of plum flavored and not quite so dense. Just lovely. The service throughout was also excellent.

Bella Vita will be staying open through Oct. 28 and I hope to make it back before then.

Red Bird

Ever since I enjoyed a terrific lunch at Red Bird in Northeast Harbor last July, I think, I've been meaning to go back to try their dinner fare. But somehow, I just never seemed to get there. So when my sister-in-law invited me to do just that I was thrilled.

As I said in my lunch review of this charming little restaurant, found essentially on the back porch of Bella Spa on Sea Street, Red Bird is the long-awaited successor to the much missed Redfield's—excellent food, fine service (from our Bulgarian waiter Pavel) and a classy but unpretentious atmosphere. The seared diver scallops I had for starters were perfectly cooked and seasoned; and I know my sister-in-law's squash soup was exquisite because I had it for lunch last time. My seared Halibut (my favorite fish), with crinkly cabbage and leaks and whipped potato, was yummy, as was her filet, served with acorn squash and broccolinni (love these in-season veggie choices!). But what really made the meal outstanding was the side dish of wild mushroom risotto, with fennel dust and truffle oil. Actually it was our waiter Pavel who talked us into this when we didn't choose it as our entrée. Oh my goodness. I don't know what chef Jesse Perrin does to create the explosions of flavor in his dishes — is it citrus? the oils? magic?— but they really shake you up a bit, in a nice way. For dessert we shared a flourless chocolate cake that was, of course, to die for.

Red Bird plans to stay open, lunch and dinner, through mid October.

I do want to mention here that I did make it back to Eden Vegetarian Café, and had another incredible wild mushroom adventure there. These, served with steamy polenta, were the kind of mushrooms that if you saw them in the woods, they'd probably scare the bejeezus out of you. But prepared by Eden's chef Mark Rampacek they were simply beautiful in every way; in color (various shades of rich chocolate and caramel brown) texture (crunchy, creamy, meaty) and taste, some of which were entirely new to me and reminded me of the way really good dirt smells.

Now I have a couple of new cookbooks to crack, to see if I can create some new adventures in my

own kitchen. Stay tuned.

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