



**My** mother is very annoyed with Caffé Uno. She had just discovered the one in Brighton and had gotten to the stage where she could persuade my dad to eat there (“why would I need to eat out when you cook such lovely food at home”) when it closed for refurbishment. In fact, if you pop down to your local Caffé Uno you may well find it looks a little different too. City Centre Restaurants have been re-vamping some of their older units, as well as opening a whole bunch of new ones. The result is a fresher, more contemporary look, far removed from the cliché of checked tablecloths and stucco walls found in some establishments. It seems that the company has taken some notice of the current renaissance in Italian restaurants. The likes of Teca and Artigiano serve fantastic food in modern environments and have breathed a bit of style into what was a rather lacklustre, neighbourhood restaurant genre.

The Caffé Uno menu is more impressive and adventurous than you would expect from a chain. The essential Italian dishes are there - spaghetti, lasagne, thin-crust pizza - but you will also find seafood, chargrilled duck breast, pan-fried hake and other temptations. Every dish is freshly prepared to order and all the sauces are homemade. Caffé Uno listen to customer feedback and constantly adapt the dishes and the menu to keep them interested.

One of the most recent projects to be completed is Caffé Uno in Esher. This wealthy suburban town is perfect for the restaurant,

which in many locations enjoys the status of a neighbourhood local. Caffé Uno are keen to establish an individual feel for each unit, with design suiting the specific location. To this end they have employed different designers for different projects. Steve Howie of Howie Design was called in for the Esher project, the managing director having seen his work on an Indian restaurant called Tiger's Pad, and was given a free reign (apart from with the budget) to design whatever he wanted.

With the brand's combination of traditional Italian quality, friendliness and modern style, Steve decided to base the design on Leonardo da Vinci's flying machine. The character seen suspended from the ceiling is Steve's interpretation of what da Vinci might have designed had he been working today. Elsewhere in the restaurant he has utilised clever paint techniques to striking but subtle effect. These paint effects, and the flying woman were both brought into being by Troika. The blurring of the text means that it avoids the huge naughtiness of writing slogans on the walls and is instead turned into an abstract effect. The day people stop writing inanities on restaurant walls will be a great one. It's like being forced to stare at a greeting card poem while you eat. Are we allowed to add our own little thoughts to the walls, perhaps scribble down our shopping list so we don't forget between the goat's cheese tart and breast of duck? No. Do these people write on their own

# Caffé Uno



walls at home? No. Just stop it and stop it right now unless you're going to do something arty like Steve.

Steve has also spent a lot of effort on the acoustics, designing the curves of the interior so that even when the restaurant is quiet it still sounds as if lots of people are talking, but noise from the kitchen is minimised.

The reception area is welcoming, with colourful lounge seats should you need to wait for a table. Warm, natural materials throughout provide a base for the airy atmosphere and the subtle change in materials is used to divide the interior.

The frontage opens out in the summer so diners can imagine they're enjoying the Italian riviera. Steve has also cut the presence of the bar down to a minimum, as Caffé Uno is really a place where people go to sit down, have a meal or enjoy a leisurely coffee, rather than a place for bartenders to show off.

Caffé Uno have recently opened in Aberdeen and Norwich, with one in Stirling due to open shortly. By the end of the year they will have refurbished a total of twelve of their older sites and they will be continuing this programme next year in selected units from their estate of over 60 outlets. At the moment the company is also researching into new sites, looking at affluent market towns and tourist locations.

Caffé Uno is showing that the local Italian restaurant need not be dull, either in food or in decor. They are also proving that brands can react to locations and combine individuality with quality.