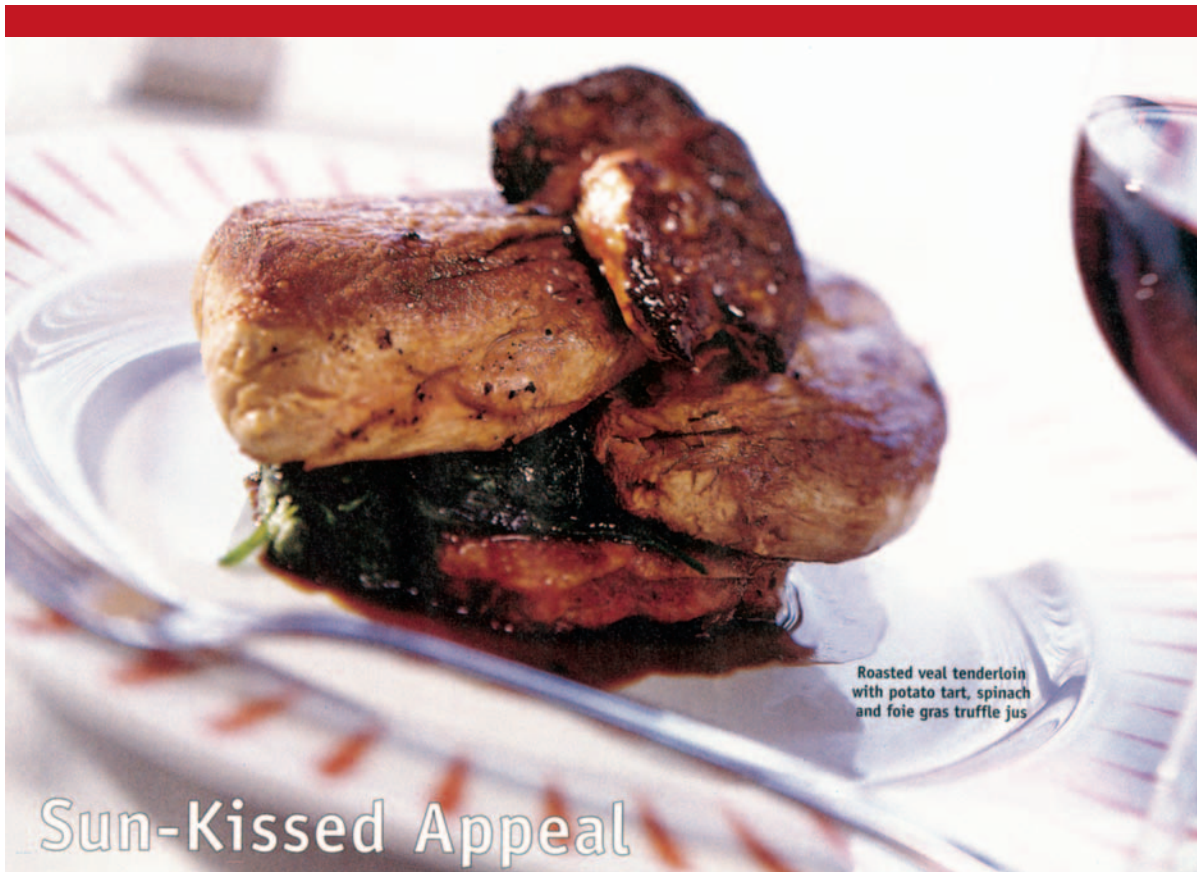


# MAY 2003 DELAWARE TODAY



Intense flavors are the hallmark of Moro. By Pam George

The new kid in town is making quite an impression. In just a few short months, Moro Restaurant has penetrated the clique of Wilmington hot spots. People clamor to enter its golden circle. On a Tuesday night, when many restaurant sales are sluggish, Moro was packed. On weekends, reservations are hard to come by. And now I know why.

Moro can claim the “X” factor, the star quality so bandied about on “American Idol.” It has the perfect blend of whimsy, style, talent and, perhaps most importantly, good taste.

Owner Michael DiBianca, a Culinary Institute of America graduate, honed his skills in South Florida and Aspen, demanding areas with international expectations. In Aspen, he worked for Tobias Lawry, now co-owner of Restaurant

821. After following Lawry to Wilmington, DiBianca left Restaurant 821 in 2001 to open Moro. Impressive career for a 27-year-old.

Like most successful chefs, DiBianca is devoted to fresh ingredients. Consequently each of his dishes explodes with

### MORO RESTAURANT

1307 N. Scott St., Wilmington 777-1800

[www.mororestaurant.net](http://www.mororestaurant.net)

Food: \*\*\*\* Service: \*\* Environment: \*\*\*\*

(no stars) Poor \* Fair \*\* Good \*\*\* Very Good \*\*\*\* Excellent

a season impact that heightens the senses. Nibble on flatbread topped with warm Brie, sweet strawberries and almonds (\$10), and you'll flash to soft days, lit by a pulsing sun.

Many items carry that sun-kissed appeal, a sprightliness gained from a hint of citrus. Then again, DiBianca named his restaurant after the intensely flavored Moro orange, also known as the blood orange.

Meyer lemon offsets endive's telltale bitterness in the crispy duck confit salad (\$10). On our first visit, we found the duck dry and stringy. This time the gorgeous meat was velvety moist.



**Moro's ambience reflects the restaurant's name. Vibrant hues of red-kissed orange, crimson and burnt sienna accent the vivid artwork on the walls and the cozy tables sectioned by the tall half-moon dividers.**

Grilled apples snoozed under tender baby arugula leaves, tossed with candied walnuts and Maytag blue cheese (\$9). A little less balsamic vinegar would have increased my enjoyment. Roasted tomatoes added a tangy kick to the braised lamb shank (\$25). The meat pulled easily from the bone, soaking up the savory jus that also seeped into cheddar grits.

Brilliant flavors spring from other memorable accents. Clam chowder spiked with saffron provided a colorful backdrop for roasted rockfish (\$24). The chowder – thick with tiny whole clams, diced potatoes and flecks of bacon – was sublime. A heavily seasoned rockfish would have been overkill. The kitchen served it up simply, skin side up, on a nest of wilted spinach. Foie gras crowned the roasted veal tenderloin (\$26), a glossy piece of meat that melted on the tongue. The impossibly tender filet mignon (\$27), meanwhile, got a punch from Stilton-whipped potatoes and a peppercorn jus.

DiBianca, assisted by John Pashak, clearly wants to showcase his creativity. This is the kind of innovation seen in "Iron Chef" competitions. The adventure extends to the sides: English pea risotto, oregano polenta, French lentils and grilled pineapple.

Perhaps the main stage of DiBianca's talent is his "study of food," a tasting of one item prepared three ways. During our visit, we chose the foie gras (\$19). Roasted foie gras with passion fruit suffered a bit from its bed of micro greens. We wanted to probe the foie gras' buttery texture without the greens' snap. Foie gras mousse over brioche, sweetened with Sauternes, added an airiness to the goose liver's powerful taste. Our favorite, though, was seared foie

gras paired with pears, sun-dried cherries and aged balsamic. Though impressive, all three paled against the seared foie gras appetizer (\$15), perfumed with lavender demi-glace and served with roasted plums and Maytag blue cheese.

Stop salivating. The downside to favoring fresh ingredients is that the menu changes twice a week. You may never see the roasted lamb shank. No worries. Call ahead to request your personal favorite. The kitchen will oblige if ingredients are still seasonal.

Either way, you'll easily find something else to tempt your appetite. Don't be surprised if you develop a sudden case of gluttony. While Moro's prices are comparable to other fine-dining spots, your greed may boost your budget.

The restaurant, a mix of retro chic and hip appointments, is also a feast for the eyes. Philadelphia-based DAS Architects, which handled the makeover at Le Bec-Fin, is responsible for the urban details. Nothing remains of the building's former occupant, the Sow's Ear.

Moro's color scheme apes its namesake, known for vibrant shades of red-kissed orange, maroon and crimson. Burnt sienna wraps around a light fixture and elegant glass. Blushing walls are festooned with vivid art.

The upstairs bar is the cushy lounge's focal point. The area is so swank, it's a destination in itself. Sink into a plush chair and sip a blood orange cosmopolitan (\$7) or a martini made with basil-infused vermouth (\$8). Unfortunately, there's not a lot of room for tête-à-têtes. It's more a stopping ground, a quick place to grab a flute of Mirabelle sparkling wine by Schramsberg (\$8).