

Pictures: JamesDouglas093188-10



Anna Bagdalska serves a tasty appetiser

093188-12



Smooth operator

Maybe it's the Mamma Mia effect. Or maybe someone at Vanilla is a genuine Abba fan. Either way, the Swedish super group's Waterloo album was on a loop the night we dined there. The carefree pop of Waterloo and Honey, Honey seemed slightly at odds with the stylish surroundings but it was the perfect soundtrack to a fun night with friends.

We were out with our fabulous neighbours Mike and Giulia. Despite living next door for two years, it was our first night out together and we wanted to go somewhere that would impress. My wife's hairdresser had gushed about an anniversary meal at Vanilla and I'd had a memorable lunch there a few years ago, so we booked a table for four.

The restaurant is centrally located in a Regency basement in Cambray Place,

with a beauty and hair salon upstairs. As soon as we walked in, we knew we'd made a good choice. With its curved polished bar, wooden floors and contemporary furnishings, Vanilla oozes sophistication. The soft lighting, low ceilings and candlelit tables give the restaurant a warm and cosy ambience. We were warmly greeted by owner Martin Charalambous, who showed us to a round table in the middle of the room.

The excellent a la carte menu offers modern British food with an international flavour. With eight starters, ranging from £4.95 to £7.95, and nine main courses, ranging from £9.95 to £19.95, plus daily specials, there was plenty of choice for the four of us. None of us was quite sure what sousing was, but my wife loves anything with beetroot so ordered the deep fried goats cheese, soured beetroot, and balsamic reduction. We weren't any clearer when the dish arrived (turns out

it's a posh word for pickled) but my wife loved the gooey, creamy cheese with the sweet beetroot. I was intrigued by the combination of butternut squash, coconut milk and coriander soup and it turned out to be a revelation, at once familiar and warming, but with the zing of eastern flavours. Our dining partners both said their duck spring roll, chilli jam and baby leaves were delicious.

As the conversation flowed, with Abba in the background, so did the wine and we were soon onto our second bottle of excellent Chilean Palena Cabernet Sauvignon 2005. The restaurant was about two-thirds full with groups and couples and the atmosphere was convivial.

Our main courses arrived promptly, with a side order of chips that I'd ordered. There was no need for them as my slow-cooked belly pork with thyme potato cake, carrot puree and lentil sauce



The decor oozes sophistication



The restaurant in Cambray Place

was ample. The pork was presented in two triangular pieces, like slices of cake, with a lovely crisp layer of crackling on the top. The meat melted in the mouth and the carrot puree delivered a sweet kick. The lentils were an unusual addition but their earthy taste and texture complemented the dish. Giulia had been craving a steak and said her Cotswold beef fillet was beautifully cooked. It came with a creamy horseradish mash, baby spinach and a rich red wine jus. My wife's confit duck leg was also dressed in a red wine

jus, accompanied by creamy dauphinoise potatoes and a wonderfully moist red cabbage. Mike's rump of lamb also with dauphinoise potatoes from the daily specials was juicy and tender and just as well received.

Never one to turn down dessert I found room for bread and butter pudding with warm custard sauce. It was pleasant but unremarkable and didn't match up to the food that preceded it. Better was Vicky's warm pear and almond tart with clotted cream which was moist, crumbly and

VANILLA

Location: Cambray Place, Cheltenham
Food: A la carte menu offers modern British food with an international flavour
Drink: Excellent wine
Service: Friendly welcome
Atmosphere: Warm and cosy ambience, convivial
Price: Starters from £4.95, main courses from £9.95 and desserts from £5

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bursting with flavour – perfect comfort food. She struggled to finish it so I unselfishly stepped in.

Our neighbour showed more restraint and shared a warm chocolate pudding with Baileys ice cream. Judging by the mms and aahs, it tasted as good as it looked. The bill with two bottles of wine came to just over £140. As we stepped outside into the cold night air, we all agreed that for a great night out, Vanilla's got it licked.

Adrian Jones