

Going Out: Eating out

Mediterranean twist makes Vanilla vibrant

IN BRIEF

Atmosphere: cosy
Food: modern English with a Mediterranean twist
Drink: range of more than 30 wines, ranging in price from £11.50 to £35 for a bottle
Service: efficient and friendly
Price: main courses £9.85 to £17.50
Extra: restaurant is exclusively non-smoking. Booking is advised on Fridays and Saturdays
Contact: 01242 228228 or visit www.vanillainc.co.uk

Pictures: Jo Harvell E530120-3



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■ **FINE DINING:** Martin Charalambous opened his Vanilla restaurant 11 years ago

FOR newcomers to Cheltenham, the first impression you get when you ring Vanilla is that you've got the wrong number. There can't be many restaurants directly below a hair and beauty salon but then Vanilla is a bit different.

Situated in Cambray Place, the restaurant opened 11 years ago and enjoyed a major expansion six years later so it can now accommodate 100 diners.

The business started in 1982 as a hair salon.

A beauty salon opened six years after that and was followed by the basement bistro.

All three businesses are in the same four-storey building – which is why you get the option of the hair salon, beauty parlour or the eatery when you phone the main number.

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■ **WARM LIGHTS:** the restaurant is cosy

VANILLA

CAMBRAY PLACE, CHELTENHAM

I booked the latter, although my wife would have happily settled for any of the three alternatives.

The owner of the business is the charismatic Martin Charalambous, whose own origins go some way to explain the hint of ancient Greece in the restaurant.

The bistro recently became exclusively non-smoking and one of its attractions is that it can cater for those people wanting a quiet meal for two or a group booking.

Mr Charalambous describes the cuisine as "modern British with a Mediterranean twist" and he's spot on.

The food is a mixture of the luxurious and the exotic.

The excellent a la carte menu is changed every six weeks – unlike the talented head chef Simon Cannon, who has held his position for 10 years.

The menu, which is supplemented by a range of daily specials, begins with a choice of seven starters.

It sounds odd but I'm always surprised at how much onion goes into genuine onion soup (£4.75). I put it down to the tinned soup my parents fed me as a child that were devoid of any of the vegetables advertised on the label.

Either way, it was an excellent choice – as was the spanakopita (£5.80) that my wife opted for. It consisted of feta cheese and spinach parcels, plus Mediterranean salad.

The main courses range in price from £9.85 for red pepper and rocket risotto with rosemary sauce to £17.50 for fillet of beef, garlic cream sauce and wild mushrooms. Mixed vegetables are an extra £1.50 each.

I chose breast of chicken, dauphinoise potatoes, glazed baby onions and red wine sauce (£12.80) while my wife went for pork tenderloin with colcannon potatoes and red wine, apple and sage sauce.

Thankfully, there aren't many occasions when you look at your wife and think of your dad but this was one. "Oh it's delicious," she repeated between each mouthful, followed by "I don't think I could eat another thing" before polishing off a dessert.

It reminded us of how pleasurable eating out can be when you aren't with two young children who have to be kitted out like Robocop before eating and amused with an assortment of crayons and train noises.

For pudding I chose the warm chocolate pudding, chocolate sauce and pistachio ice cream (£5.50) while my wife, despite saying she



■ **MODERN CUISINE:** head chef Simon Cannon serves up modern English food with a Mediterranean twist

"couldn't eat another thing", opted for the warm treacle tart, orange caramel and clotted cream (£5.50). Both were delicious.

The abstract art and flaming torches that feature in Vanilla complete the perfect dining experience.

Reviewers of other newspapers have used corny puns to describe Vanilla as "a cut above the rest" because of its close proximity to a hair salon.

It's an easy trap to fall into – which is why when it comes to good food and a great atmosphere Vanilla has got it licked.

Chris Maguire