

The beauty of a basement bistro

Gourmand Blanc was delighted to find a place to eat below a salon, creating the perfect “his ’n’ hers” day out, but it didn’t go quite as he planned

SINCE the invention of the wheel, we have come a long way. Thus the human race’s transition from troglodytes to en suite urbanites has left me rather difficult to impress when it comes to innovation.



I do, however, recall a warm glow when I discovered that a wonderful person was going around the world’s department stores installing comfortable chairs and copies of *Sporting Life* next to women’s fitting rooms. My life was transformed.

But that is nothing compared with my latest find – for it’s the stuff dreams are made of.

Picture a packed beauty salon where the fairer sex fill a few hours with a facial and a fancy hairdo – but pity their poor partners, abandoned in Cheltenham with nothing to do but wander the streets in search of a hospitable hostelry. It’s tantamount to mental torture.

Fortunately, on my recent travels around the spa town, I came across Vanilla, an emporium which appears to offer a unique combination. The ground floor is geared up for hair and beauty treatments, but my eye strayed down the stairs to the bistro in the basement.

Immediately I found myself practising such phrases as “Take as long as you like dear” and “Why not have the full works because you’re worth it” as I pressed my nose against the window.

A plan was born and I later relate my “his and hers” day out schedule to Mrs B, who promptly insists that she’d rather have a “his” than a “hers”, which is how we find ourselves seated in the Vanilla Bistro early one Friday evening. Not quite the programme I’d envisaged, but a delight nonetheless.

The welcome is as warm as the cosy restaurant, which has a subtle suggestion of Ancient Greece. Its abstract art and flaming torches conjure up the legendary empire’s affection for food and drink.

The restaurant is delightfully turned out (and gloriously smoke-free) as are the staff, who have swiftly seen to our initial needs. Admittedly it’s early and quiet, but with hordes



High standards: Gourmand Blanc thought Vanilla was a civilised restaurant with good food and efficient staff

Picture: Clint Randall



of party guests starting to arrive for a private function, the level of service never dips.

To start, I am immediately drawn to the deep-fried goats’ cheese (£5.80). It seems as though this pervasive dish is popping up all over the South West like snowdrops, but this

is an elegant, well-executed example. The crispy coating easily yields to reveal a creamy catch. It’s served not on a bed of soggy lettuce with a couple of cucumber slices, but pickled beetroot and tomato chutney which make the perfect combatants.

Mrs B is glad to see an old favourite on the menu to kick-start her evening – seared scallops (£7.25). The price seems a trifle excessive for a mere three of the morsels. But Mrs B says it’s worth every penny for the accompanying chilli caramel and cream, never mind the mol-luscs.

During our meal, attentive waitresses interject to enquire about our food, top up our drinks and generally make us feel cared for, which all adds to a warm ambience as we await our main courses. (Luckily, no one asks us if we’ve been away this year.)

I have chosen tiger prawn fettucine with a tomato and basil veloute (£13.25) which is an odd choice considering my usual carnivorous cravings.

Twirling the pasta round my fork results in the sauce splattering my clean shirt. Mrs B wonders if I should ask for one of those handy

capotes from the salon upstairs. She, meanwhile, has plumped for the special, which is duck in a red wine jus, with fondant potato and celeriac puree (£13.95). And, for once, she can’t fault it. Past servings of fondant potato that could have passed as tennis balls are at once forgotten. The duck is on the bone (we think it’s a leg – but it hardly matters since Mrs B is going to eat it, not dance with it) and boasts a gorgeously crispy skin.

A sated Mrs B deserts the dessert course. My pudding has to be vanilla (get it?) crème brûlée (£4.90). I’ll never be converted to the cold variety, a fact I recalled just after ordering it and quickly lost interest. My fault entirely for presuming it would be served warm.

All in all, Vanilla is a most civilised restaurant with a high standard of cooking. It may be below a hair salon, but it’s cut above many of the eateries in this well-heeled town.

We paid £57.60 for a three-course meal, a two-course meal and drinks.
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