

Vanilla's puddings are to dine for Sweet success

Pictures: submitted, not for resale



Innovative food at Vanilla is a delight

It was the sticky toffee pud that did it. One mouthful and we were won over – Vanilla had made it into the roll of honour.

Connoisseurs know that when it's good, it's very very good. But when it's bad, it meets a pretty sticky end.

This pud was pure heaven. It was topped with a brandy snap basket in which sat some creamy vanilla ice cream. The whole concoction was surrounded by a sea of syrupy caramel naughtiness.

The Cheltenham restaurant is an attractive spot for lunch or dinner and in January, it's offering a two-course menu for £10 per person from Mondays to Thursday. It means you can relax without worrying about your Christmas spending crisis.

Tucked away in Cambray Place, the ambience is perfect with soft lighting, contemporary décor and freshly-cooked food, courtesy of head chef Simon Canon and second-in-command Ryan Bennett.

Under the guidance of manageress Julia Roberts and owner Martin Charalambous, the basement restaurant has built a name for itself since opening 12 years ago. With the Vanilla hair and beauty salon above, customers on pamper days can lunch in the restaurant, and there are plans for al fresco tables and a café-style menu.

We made an evening visit, and to start we chose aubergine and parmesan croquettes with honey-roasted vegetables, served with aoli (£5.95) and Scottish smoked



Head chef Simon Canon, right

salmon with spring onion cake and creamed horseradish (£6.75).

The croquettes were a revelation, an unusual mix of aubergine, crispy parmesan coating with peppers and vegetables. The flavours melded together deliciously.

The salmon with spring onion cake was a delicate combination. The onion cake had just enough flavour but in no way overpowered the dish and the horseradish was a thankfully mild affair.

For mains, we chose fillet of monkfish wrapped in Parma ham with red cabbage and rosemary cream (£15.95) and Gressingham duck breast with vegetable spring roll and chilli with a coriander and lime dressing (£14.25).

The fish looked pretty on a bed of cabbage, set against the creamy sauce with a sprig of rosemary. The highlight of the dish was the cabbage – gloriously rich – but the Parma ham lacked taste and added little to the dish and the sauce was bland.

VANILLA

Location: Cambray Place, Cheltenham

Atmosphere: Buzzy

Food: Freshly cooked, loads of choice

Drink: House wine from £3.20 per glass, £12.50 per bottle

Service: Excellent

Price: Main courses from £9.95-£18. January – two courses for £10, Mon-Thurs.

Contact: 01242 228228

The duck, however, was a different story. Pink in the middle, it was tender and a joy to eat. It came with vegetables and the flavours combined for an unusual dish.

Desserts were a triumph. As well as the sticky toffee pudding, we ordered treacle tart (£5.75) which was served with chantilly cream and delicate splashes of raspberry coulis. The tart was surprisingly light and the berry coulis added just that edge of freshness to brighten the flavours.

Joyce Matthews

this week's

wine

with Mel Jones



New World Fizz

Putting the sparkle into your Christmas

CHAMPAGNE is the best sparkling wine in the world. It's startlingly expensive and yet the market for it is buoyant.

I love a glass of champagne, on the right occasion, but I rarely want two because it's so searingly dry and acidic.

There are three solutions. The first is to buy demi sec champagne, which is nowhere near sweet but doesn't catch your throat with dryness the way brut does. The second is to buy New World sparkling wine, which is just a little sweeter and has the benefit of being cheaper.

The third is not to buy sparkling wine at all, because if you spend £10 to £30 on still wine you really get your bells rung.

However. At the end of the year, sparkling wine is a must and there are some fabulous offers on. Oddbins has 20 per cent off all wines it sells exclusively and nationally, if you buy six or more. Majestic has an astonishing range of sparkling wines and champagne reduced by 25 per cent, 33 per cent and even 50 per cent for Canard Duchene, which is a lovely sparkler. Thresher is still running the three for two offer.

We tried a small range of sparkling wines from Australia and New Zealand. All had their second fermentation in bottle, in the style used in champagne, which we now have to call traditional, rather than champenoise.

Marks & Spencer's Bluff Hill Brut, which is from New Zealand and is made by Montana, is £7.99. It had a very attractive yeasty, bready smell and was beautifully tasty. While it was definitely dry, it didn't have the searing aridity of some. It tasted of apples and we loved it.

Jacob's Creek Chardonnay/Pinot Grigio is £7.99 from Waitrose, Morrisons and Sainsbury's, £7.94 at Tesco and £8.99 or £5.99 at Thresher. The smell wasn't great, but sparkling wine is rarely about smell. It had a confectioned whiff of pink shrimp sweets. It was light in the mouth and not quite dry, but very easy and pleasant to drink. The taste lasted.

Pelorus Vintage 2001, which is £16.99 or £13.59 from Majestic, is made by Cloudy Bay in New Zealand. It had a pleasant, fruity smell, slightly marred by an initial whiff of sulphur. It had a lot more texture and grip than the others, which lost it points. A good wine for wine aficionados, but a waste of money for a large group. It was long lasting and pretty dry.

Greenpoint Vintage 2002 is £12.99 from Waitrose and Tesco. It smelled of creme soda and tasted of grapefruit pith.

Pelorus NV is £17.99 or £11.99 at Thresher and £14.99 or £11.99 at Majestic. It had a simple lemony smell and was clean, simple and lemony in the mouth. David said he'd be disappointed if he'd shelled out good money for it.

We also tried **Wyndham Estate Bin 555 Sparkling Shiraz**, which is £7.99 from Morrisons. We weren't impressed and my daughter summed it up nicely. She said: "It's weird." Which is a fairly succinct tasting note.