

Restaurant review
By Joanna Blythman

A cafe with culture

Saramago Cafe
CCA, Sauchiehall Street,
Glasgow 0141 352 4920
Lunch/dinner **£5.95-£15**
Food rating **8/10**

‘WE bake our bread fresh every morning using only organic flour.” A heart-warming undertaking that instantly inspires confidence, and one which you’d expect from a serious restaurant with a full complement of pastry chefs. So finding this declaration at the bottom of the menu at Saramago, the casual cafe in Glasgow’s Centre for Contemporary Arts (CCA), is surprising.

Even more surprising is the fact that the promised bread actually materialises – no lame excuses about running out – and tastes even better than you’d dared to hope, what with its ecru crumb, its proper crust, chewy sole and distinct, but not overwhelming sour dough tang. The pleasant surprise continues when you find that the cafe doesn’t (as many others do) charge you more for this bread and use some inferior bought-in stuff as standard. No, when a dish features bread here, you get the home-baked article. I’m loving this place right away. And I’m rendered speechless, well almost, to find that Saramago serves its Middle East-inspired dishes with homemade flat bread, so puffy, light and pliable that it puts many Levantine restaurants to shame.

I also approve of the menu declaration that follows: “All gratuities go to staff”. This way you can be sure that punters’ appreciative tips aren’t being filched by evil management or counted towards the minimum wage calculation. You can’t help feeling that Jose Saramago, the celebrated anarcho-communist novelist/poet/playwright, would heartily approve. I presume the cafe is named after him. If not, I guess he’d like it anyway. Saramago penned memorable lines, such as “chaos is merely order waiting to be deciphered” and “if there is a way for the world



to be transformed for the better, it can only be done by pessimism; optimists will never change the world for the better”. Just the sort of thing that moody, intellectual, arty types sit around and ponder in places like the CCA, or which trip off the tongue of Max von Sydow characters in Woody Allen films.

Come to think of it, Saramago is a vegetarian outfit, with the exception of some incongruous haggis fritters, by and large offering the sort of food that’s appeals to healthy types; vegetable centric, you might say. Having said that, let’s remember that this is Glasgow, so you can have your salad with a side order of finger-licking hand-cut chips. Alternatively, you can plump for their parsnip and sweet potato equivalents and convince yourself that you’ve had a spa meal.

Dishes here are cheap and generous and rather well prepared. If the red pepper humus was too solid, the basic version was not. I have had smokier baba ganoush, but this rendition wasn’t at all bad. Ever so slightly grated carrot, in its cumin seed, lemon and coriander dressing, was not to be confused with boring raw carrot batons. Plump green and black olives showed discriminating buying. Many olives taste like cardboard – not these.

Ratatouille in a crunchy tartlet shell was potentially a blast from the past, memories of 1980s hessian wholefood cooking and Cranks recipe book, but at £7.95, accompanied by a crunchy coleslaw made with fresh dill and caraway seeds (there’s a lot to be said for a good slaw), and a rocket and pine kernel salad, it felt like a decent all round proposition.

A Thai noodle salad, potentially disastrous in the hands of non-Asian chefs, proved to be invigorating, thanks to the extravagant use of matchsticks of warming raw root ginger. With noodles that were still firm in the mouth and a good lime and fish sauce dressing, near-raw mangetouts and toasted peanuts, it actually achieved those textural and flavour contrasts that make south-east Asian cooking so bright, light and appetite-whetting.

Too many arts cafes rely on things toothsome to mask an uninspiring, pedestrian savoury offer. At Saramago, there’s not much by the way of pudding, other than ice cream, chocolate cake, and the grown-up’s dessert, affogato. I quite like this. It stops me eating cakes. My body is a temple, after all, or rather it would be, if my willpower was stronger.

Bar stool
By Andy Gemmill



BABBITY BOWSTERS
16-18 Blackfriars Street
Merchant City
Glasgow

WHAT IS IT? Babbity’s has been in its wee tranquil corner of Glasgow’s Merchant City for 27 years. The bar has a fierce following and is known for its beer-and-food offering along with its warm welcome. The charming white building, originally a tobacco merchant’s built around 1790, is made up of a bar, a first-floor restaurant, six ensuite bedrooms and a popular beer garden. I stayed in the main bar which is a bright open space with simple furnishings, with an old fireplace and loads of local art works. There is a large corner sitting area next to the bar which if it was in a London members’ bar would be described as the VIP area. There was also a great folk band playing, and live music is a regular event.

INTERESTING FACT The name comes from a type of Scottish dance from the 18th century, with some rude connotations depending on which regular you talk to.

VERDICT You get a feeling here that the staff are wary of you until you prove you are worth chatting to. I know that might sound odd-putting for some but I quite like this old-school pub mentality. The place feels special because it has a great cross-section of Glaswegian humanity. I would love to be a regular somewhere like this and for that reason I will be back to try to prove my worth.

DRINKS Not a bad selection but could be a bit better. There were three guest ales but I went for a pint of Erdinger, a German wheat beer, which was reasonable value at £4.

FOOD I ate in the bar area where the menu is good, homely gastro-pub grub. I had a homemade beef and red wine pie with veg and mash, which was £9.85.

PRICE Not too bad at all. Pint of lager £3.10, small white wine from £2.05.

CHILDREN Kids are allowed in until 8pm, if eating.

ALFRESCO There’s a lovely beer garden which was a bursting at the seams during these recent sunny days.

AVOID IF you are looking for piped music and one-armed bandits

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