

Casamia, Bristol

by LUCIE WOOD - Friday, February 16, 2007

As far as dining out goes, Bristol isn't London. We don't have the plethora of restaurants to choose from or the margins to pay quite the same concentration of talent that the metropolis spews out.

But, due in part to much of this talent renouncing the city for a better life in the sunny South-West and, more importantly, a rank of up-and-coming home-grown innovators, you can eat well in and around here.

Then, very occasionally, you can eat exceptionally well. So much so, that the M4 might as well be replaced by a single-lane pony track for all you care.

Last Saturday night at Casamia in Westbury-on-Trym there was nowhere else in the world I would have rather been. Although, it seemed not to be Westbury-On-Trym at all but somewhere in Northern Italy.

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Down a narrow passageway prettily lined with hanging baskets and tables and chairs, terracotta floor tiles, red-brick arches and paintings of heavily evocative Italian scenes frame the white linen-covered tables, themselves secluded by wrought iron screens. It felt comfortable, cosy and private.

Casamia may have had plenty of time to warm up - it's been here for the past eight years - but it's only recently that young chefs Peter and Jonray Sanchez-Iglesias have returned from a failed venture in Cheltenham to take over the stoves at their parents' restaurant.

This meant it was curtains for the cannelloni and other traditional dishes and the daring debut of a cutting-edge contemporary menu. It has caused ripples that may well turn into a sensation, for this year Casamia has gained a two 'knife and fork' rating in the coveted Michelin Guide.

We ordered at the bar and moved to our table with a bottle of the restaurant's highly recommended red in hand (La Segreta Rosso, £17.95), which was smooth but nowhere near as lovely as what was to come. Some fat green olives and a slice of the home-made bread, dusted with salt and with the consistency of a doughnut, preceded two fabulous starters.

Smoked ham hock and guinea fowl terrine (£6.50) came on a clear glass plate with pickled baby vegetables. It was a generous hunk of meat with all the intense flavour of a home-made dish.

I had the choice of chicken or vegetable stock to make my fennel soup (£5.95); how many restaurants go to this much trouble? Thick, creamy and the most delicate green colour, served with the effective but very simple garnish of a sprig of rock chive, it was stunning.

I blame it on my date's ravenous appetite but he was convinced that a proper Italian meal should have four courses, and so we decided to work in a shared dish of pasta from the page-long list before our mains.

The fusilli was as every pasta dish should be: hot, al dente and using very simple but high-quality ingredients, in this case a chunky pesto that wasn't too salty and roasted pine nuts for texture. We made short work of that.

The best thing about this meal, apart from being an epic three and a half hours long, was that it was consistently good. The roast Gressingham duck breast (£17.50) was a tender bird with wilted spinach, swede gratin and tea-infused prunes - an unusual combination where the sweetness set off the meat.

I had really wanted to eat the John Dory with roast *desirée* potatoes, green olives and parsley (£17.50) but, as all the fish is brought in fresh from Cornwall, it had run out.

No matter, for my crispy-skinned red mullet with asparagus pannacotta, dribbled with a sweet pink grapefruit and saffron jus (£17.50) was, in all honesty, the best fish dish I have had this year. The flavours all seemed at home with each other and exploded in my mouth like the pop biscuits in Enid Blyton's Faraway Tree.

Meanwhile, a side of spinach and garlic (yes, we did order that too) (£2.50) was proof that properly combining just two of nature's flavours results in a thing of beauty.

Throughout all this mountain of food, we had been teased by Spanish-born owner Paco Sanchez-Iglesias with several of the fabulous-looking desserts, waved under our noses. 'None for you unless you eat everything up,' he says.

We were damned if we were going to forgo dessert, so the finale was a shared plate of chocolate beignets with home-made espresso ice cream and white

chocolate foam (£5.95). The doughnuts were soft, warm balls containing molten chocolate, and the ice cream presented in a small white pot went with it beautifully.

Paco and his wife Susan are proud of the work their boys are doing in the kitchen and rightly so. The meal we ate would rival River Café and almost every other contemporary Italian restaurant you could care to name. I wouldn't be surprised if those Michelin inspectors are back with a further accolade next year. Until then, I thoroughly recommend a visit.