

The View review

Annie Bullen
catches up with the gossip at Carlton's



Carltons Restaurant • 24 Carlton Place • Southampton • 02380 232664
www.carltonsrestaurant.co.uk

I knew it was going to be a good evening when a dish of crispy ciabatta bread slices, olives and a bowl of good olive oil arrived, unbidden, at our bar table.

I hadn't seen my friend Lindsey for a while so a chance to sample the menu at Carltons while catching up with each others' lives was a great opportunity.

The restaurant, above the stylish Ninety Degrees bar in Southampton's Carlton Place, is a well-kept secret, enjoyed by those in the know.

I was just getting into the gossip about Lindsey's recent trip to Edinburgh when our waiter, Lillo (he's from Sicily), summoned us upstairs to the spacious restaurant.

The whole place is modern and comfortable. Downstairs, where they serve an all-day tapas menu and a bar menu, you sink into bucket-style leather seats in the well-lit room with wooden floors, red and black furnishings with lots of mirrors and a long bar that obviously caters for the serious cocktail crowd.

Aircraft-style lighting outlines each step on the way up to the restaurant; from our table



by the window we looked out over Carlton Place and Bedford Place, livening up nicely as people came out in the warm summer evening to enjoy the night-life on offer.

Lillo, who turned out to be a bit of a philosopher, talked us through the menu which featured light, fresh food. Lindsey, who doesn't eat meat, found plenty to tempt her and eventually went for a vegetable cake with thyme on a pea and herb rice salad for her starter. She chose salmon fillet with fresh lime, with crab and saffron rice for her main course.

Pasta features prominently on this fusion-style menu and both my starter and main course were pasta-based, as Lillo kindly pointed out. But we agreed it's jolly good for you in all sorts of ways and I was allowed to order king prawns on linguine coated with a light tomato and garlic sauce, with just enough chilli butter to give a spicy kick. Thick ribbons of pappardelle pasta with a thin coating of tomato, chunks of meaty Merguez sausage, shavings of parmesan and a covering of perfectly cooked broccoli florets looked good enough to photograph. So I did.

We had the chance for a fair bit of gossip before the food arrived – it's all freshly cooked and looked very good on the white plates. The portion sizes are perfect – not daunting but generous enough to be satisfying.

Lindsey's starter turned out to be a crispy savoury 'cake', filled with pureed vegetables. It was served on a risotto-like base which was creamy and lemony. Very good, she said.

In the interests of accurate reporting, I

tasted the saffron and crab rice timbale (rice was her thing that evening just as pasta was mine) which accompanied her salmon. The crab came through nicely, highlighted by the flavour of lime. Three grilled tomatoes on the vine were a nice touch.

We could have had sea bass, lamb fillet, faggots or char-grilled chicken with bubble and squeak. They do an oriental-style duck, steak and pork belly, too.

Puds include sticky toffee, chocolate and hazelnut fondue and cranberry and clementine crumble but I'm afraid that the pasta and rice spoiled us for another morsel. Next time perhaps.

Sebastien, the manager of Carltons, came over to see how we were doing and revealed that the bar and restaurant were in the same ownership as Southampton's ever-popular La Margherita restaurant, which explains the Italian touches and stylish surroundings.

Cocktails, wines and beers are served with style. We were both driving, so limited ourselves to a glass of San Genovese each and finished with good espresso, made at the bar by Lillo.

I liked the music which was not obtrusive but jolly and featured a variety of style from Spain, Italy and several other countries. The big black piano is for show only – look closely and you'll see there's no keyboard.

The menu is not huge which is always a good sign, allowing the chef to do everything well. There's plenty of variety and a lovely mix of flavours, plenty of fresh herbs and vegetables used imaginatively.

Our 2-course meal, without wine, cost about £38. ▼