

The View review

Annie Bullen misses the Valentine specials, but loses her heart to Da Vinci



A view of the interior across the bistecca alla pizzaiola

Da Vinci • 68 Castle Street • Salisbury • SPI 3TS • 01722 328402

It's not often you meet a chef so enthusiastic about what he does that he's keen to share his recipes and ideas. Karl Regan left his native Ireland when he was a teenager to become a chef and now, about three decades later, is still as excited about food as he was then. You wouldn't guess it from his name, but his parentage is Irish-Italian and he's followed the latter influence in his cooking, taking classic Italian recipes and refining them until he's completely happy that they will satisfy his customers.

Karl opened the classy Da Vinci in the middle of last year and, despite the tough times we find ourselves in, says business is good. When we visited I spotted a few tiny silver hearts on the floor – reminders of the hectic Valentine's night when rose petals were strewn on the pavement outside and Karl cooked his heart out with dishes such as monkfish stuffed with caviar and asparagus.



Chef patron Karl Regan

Everything about the restaurant is comforting. Pleasant light terracotta-coloured walls, crisp and spotless table linen, good-sized sparkling glasses and the impression of plenty of space. The menu is not huge – always a good sign when you want to know that the food is freshly prepared and cooked to order.

A well-made minestrone soup, with even cubes of fresh vegetables, pasta and, sometimes, beans, is a test of a careful chef but it's also very filling. So I was grateful to my partner for choosing the soup for his starter, allowing me to go for *gamberoni* – king prawns with a crisp jacket of batter, served with a light salad and a sweet chilli dip. Karl explained that he makes a tempura batter, with rice flour, for this dish, and the result is delicious. The fat, juicy prawns were sizzling hot, the batter thin as lace with a wonderful crunch and I think I could happily have eaten them all night. The tender salad had a sweetish dressing, which went nicely with the chilli dip. I pinched some of my partner's bread to mop up the rest of the dip, then tasted his soup, which was rich and satisfying with a curl of spaghetti at the bottom of the bowl.

For years I've made it a rule not to eat veal because of the conditions in which the young animals are kept. But Karl buys his from a small farmer at Bowerchalke where they are

reared humanely – so I opted for *saltimbocca*, which translates roughly as 'jump in the mouth'. Wafer thin slices of veal, so tender you could eat it with a spoon, topped with prosciutto and served with a cream and sage sauce was the nicest main course I've eaten for a long time. That and my fellow diner's sirloin steak came with a dish of gratin *dauphinoise* potatoes, lightly cooked broccoli and mange tout. The *bistecca alla pizzaiola* had been gently fried with black olives and capers and covered with a thick tomato sauce.

Karl makes his own *tiramisu*, the delicious coffee and chocolate cake beloved of Italians. The name means 'pick me up' but it left me feeling contented. A couple of cups of coffee and a pleasant evening came to an end – and we didn't even see the friendly ghost alleged (in a very Italian way) to pinch bottoms. ♥

Our meal, without drinks, came to around £50

What we could have had

Starters include garlic mushrooms and prawns (all mushrooms come from a small company based near Stockbridge), sardines with a tomato and chilli sauce, scallops (collected by divers), pan-fried and covered with a light tomato and cream sauce, mussels, smoked chicken and avocado salad and a mixed-leaf salad with smoked salmon and prawns.

Mains include a good range of steak dishes (again Karl uses locally produced meat) including the very popular and rich *bistecca paesana* which is a fillet, stuffed with Dolcelatte, char-grilled and served with a cream and Dolcelatte sauce. There are three veal dishes, chicken, duck, risotto and fish. There is also a good selection of pasta with a range of meat and tomato sauces.



Karl's home-made tiramisu