

The View review

Rosie Staal *exchanges the grey of an English winter for a satisfying slice of sunny Italy*



Da Vinci • 68 Castle Street • Salisbury • SPI 3TS
01722 328402 • www.davinciofsalisbury.co.uk

One tried-and-tested antidote to the prospect of yet another of those cheerless, grey days that beset us in this country is the certain knowledge that in the evening there's going to be a visit to a restaurant.

With D as a willing accomplice, we escape Fortress Home for the away-from-it-all delights of an Italian restaurant, a promise of virtual sunshine at the end of a foggy drive to Salisbury. Da Vinci is in Castle Street, where many of the local estate agents have their offices, not far from three large employers, including Friends Provident next door. By day, then, the restaurant is a magnet for office workers and shoppers.

By night, the restaurant attracts diners in their droves – all ages, all sorts, who on our visit range from three exemplary schoolgirls out with their parents, through young couples with romance on their minds, to a dozen friends sharing a 50th birthday celebration. The place fairly buzzes and is obviously massively popular since booking is advised, especially on Fridays and Saturdays.

D and I are settled at our table-for-two by a smiling Roberto, or it could be his colleague Antonio as both are tall and unmistakably Italian with über-trendy glasses. We think they must be brothers. No, they're childhood friends, they tell us, and they come from the north, near Lake Garda.

It takes us ages to make our choice from the huge menus. Nicola, co-owner with Karl, the head chef, comes over to help and it is when she mentions how the ingredients are fresh and mainly local and everything is freshly prepared to order that I feel confident enough to stray from any of my default safe modes, such as pasta or risotto.

I end up choosing what turns out to be a ravishingly delicious meal of sardines alla Sicilia followed by salmone alla crosta (salmon stuffed with crayfish and spinach, wrapped in filo pastry and set on a lush-coloured pool of lobster bisque). I love it all, every last taste-laden flake of it. 'This is cooked by someone who really knows what they're doing,' I am moved to remark to D. 'Someone who is completely competent and who cooks with flair. It's a rare find.'

D readily agrees as he feasts with huge satisfaction on pan-fried scallops oven-baked with pancetta, Parmesan, tomato and cream, and then a perfectly cooked fillet steak served with mushrooms and a stalk of vine tomatoes. We share the vegetables: very nicely prepared herby carrot mash, potato dauphinoise and skinny beans.

All the puddings are freshly made and unbelievably tempting. It may be an inherent sensible streak, hitherto strangely dormant, that stops me having one, but it is more likely just the inability to choose between such delights as lemon and almond torta, pannacotta, tiramisu and various wonderful chocolate concoctions. Enough must be enough.

Nicola and Karl, who are due to marry this month, have created a venue that offers a quality dining experience – where attention is paid to the things that matter like proper linen on the tables, good wine glasses, decent cutlery and so on – in an atmosphere where diners feel embraced and welcomed into the heart of an Anglo-Italian home. **V**

Our two-course meal, without drinks, cost £48



Pan-fried scallops oven-baked with pancetta, Parmesan, tomato and cream



Fillet steak with mushrooms and a stalk of vine tomatoes



Salmone alla crosta

Karl and Nicola met while working at a Hampshire restaurant and have long shared an ambition to run their own place. They opened Da Vinci two years ago with a menu and an ethos that reflect Karl's extensive and impressive repertoire – and the fact that his father is Italian.