

Culinary magic is a treat for the eyes and taste buds

Unpretentious dishes with unbeatable flavour combinations? It's all good



Louisa Finch
Table service

@GREENGODDESSLOU

Once upon a time at a candlelit table on the shores of Lake Garda, I was rendered speechless by a plateful of tomatoes and mozzarella. So that's what tomatoes taste like when they've been grown in the warmth of the Mediterranean sun. The rest of the holiday followed in much the same fashion – from tortellini cooked in nothing but butter and sage to pots of spaghetti served up with enough seafood to leave Mr Finch misty-eyed. Every meal felt like a lesson in how quality ingredients, simply but expertly cooked, can't be bettered. The half bottles of Bardolino certainly contributed to the overall effect, but ever since that trip I've been hoping to rediscover the same culinary magic back in Scotland.

If ever a restaurant was going to deliver on that quest, it seemed likely to be Valvona & Crolla VinCaffe. Run by the

family whose renowned deli opened in Edinburgh in 1934, it's housed over two floors and from the upstairs restaurant (the downstairs space has the café), you get a great view of sky, swallows and shoppers enjoying some upmarket retail therapy. Mr Finch dives straight in with the prosciutto e rucola (£9.50) and from the contented silence, I can tell he's enjoying the finest prosciutto di Parma and sautéed Italian artichoke hearts, topped with Parmesan and extra virgin olive oil. The little rectangles of griddled polenta are attacked with gusto and his response to "how is it?" is as descriptive as ever: "It's all good."

His is a hearty portion and it's matched by my insalata gorgonzola (£7.75). I'm

living dangerously with unpasteurised gorgonzola and it's worth the risk to experience its creamy, pungent tanginess alongside fragrant pear and bitter chicory. Mounds of salad leaves are dressed simply with lemon and olive oil while a scattering of pomegranate seeds add colour, and the whole combination is a treat for the eyes and the taste buds.

Things are off to a good start and they're being helped by the choice of wine. I opt for a large glass of the "simple and elegant" Chianti Colli Senesi (£5.75) while Mr Finch tries the Aglianico Pipoli (£5.95). Before long we're discussing the feasibility of working our way through the whole wine list over the course of the coming months. "It's very reasonably priced and it would be a great place to learn about regional Italian wines," says Mr Finch. If I didn't know better I'd think he's getting a bit misty-eyed again.

The merluzzo in padella (£15.50) –

pan-fried cod with cherry tomatoes, peppers, basil and black olives – gets an equally warm reception. The fish is juicy, the tapenade is piquant and the revelation is the rocket and fennel salad. Mr Finch and I have a mutually agreed list of ingredients to avoid at all costs: fennel, dill and tarragon. Miraculously the salad doesn't have the aniseed slap-in-the-face we fear. Has the fennel been marinated? Whatever magic has been worked, the taste is subtle and refreshing.

When I've finished my rogue incursions into Mr F's salad, I turn to my melanzane alla Parmigiana (£14.50), where slices of aubergine alternate with mozzarella and the sort of rich tomato and basil sauce that tastes like it has been bubbling away on the hob for hours in somebody's grandma's kitchen. The tomatoes in this dish also clearly basked for hours in the sun before making it onto the plate. It's topped by a generous

layer of Parmesan and has been toasted under the grill for a bit of crunch. Served with a fresh leaf salad it is simple fare that packs a punch.

For dessert we risk the wrath of the waitress by asking if the torta di polenta (£6.50) is dry in comparison to the chocolate truffle cake on the menu. She says: "Yes, but it's very good with double cream." We decide to go for it and soon realise that "dry" is the wrong word – this polenta cake with pistachios tastes almost like a drizzle cake – it is moist but crumbly and absolutely delicious. If you don't have an overly sweet tooth, it's the perfect end to the meal with a shot of espresso on the side.

This has been a happy evening. We've had unpretentious Italian dishes where the ingredients are key and the flavour combinations are unbeatable. You might not be able to feel the sunshine on an autumn night in Edinburgh, but you can taste it at Valvona & Crolla VinCaffe.

Valvona & Crolla VinCaffe

11 Multrees Walk,
Edinburgh

Tel: 0131-557 0088

www.valvonacrolla.co.uk

★★★★★★



'I'm living dangerously with unpasteurised gorgonzola and it's worth the risk to experience its creamy, pungent tanginess alongside fragrant pear and bitter chicory'