

Cibo e Vino

Helen Greenwood, reviewer
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THE news that an alumnus of The River Cafe in London is cooking at a restaurant in Castle Hill has been gnawing at me for some time. Is it worth following up? If I had a truffle for every chef who put a high-profile foodie destination (Sydney's Rockpool is the other one that springs to mind) on his or her curriculum vitae, I'd be feasting for months.

Finally I could stand the guilty feeling no longer. As we rolled through the tunnels, the question rolled through my mind: what was Paul Toogood (his real name) doing cooking opposite a suburban shopping mall?

The answer is: excellent food. From the Romagna-style flatbread to the lavender, chestnut and honey ice-cream, there wasn't a dish that we didn't like. In fact, there were several for which I would happily hop in the car to make the journey again.



That Romagna-style flat bread with warm ricotta, mixed greens, chilli and jamon for one. Ethereal, feather-light bread with air bubbles and a scorch of oven. Clean Spanish serrano jamon curling over the top and a milky, just-warmed Paesanella ricotta.

Then there is the other starter: deep-fried salt cod balls with aioli and lemon. A thick, lemon zest, fennel and oregano crust. Delicate, properly soaked and minced fish. A tangy aioli that isn't too garlicky.

Even something as simple as roast beetroot salad with an Italian goat's cheese and breadcrumbs is sensational.

The beetroot are large wedges with a little skin left on that intensifies their earthiness and they've been cooked to tender. The goat's cheese, called brunet, and softened under the salamander, has a wonderful pungency. With the breadcrumbs, which are actually fried croutons for crunch, there's a textural play as well.

What is going on? Well, I can tell you that Toogood is talented and his training is showing. (He's been at Aqua Luna, Buzo and The Bellevue, as well as The River Cafe.)

His ingredients are choice and fresh. He's not fiddling with them too much. And he knows how to cook.

There are quibbles. The rocket leaves on the beetroot are those small "grass-clippings" sold at greengrocers. And the portions are as big as the blocks of land in the Hills district. To be blunt, this isn't elegant presentation. Everything is massive and fills the plate.

Our main courses suffer from the same "super-size me" syndrome and we groan in disappointment at not being able to finish them. The gnocchi is textbook light and glazed with Siena pecorino and a puddle of home-made tomato sauce.

The roast duck has crisp skin - but not in the Chinese way - and moist flesh. The dressing of lemon juice and olive

oil, flecked with ruby pomegranate seeds is lightly tart. It's a good balance with the duck. The chestnuts don't really get a guernsey in terms of flavour. But the lovely slice of pumpkin, roasted in its skin, does.

Finally, two tennis ball-sized scoops of a gorgeous lavender, chestnut and honey ice-cream served with orange zesty home-made florentines. Not too sweet, not too creamy and with lots of elusive hints of ingredients.

Some things that don't work as well as the food at Cibo e Vino. If you miss the driveway before the restaurant, you're going to end up going around many blocks.

It's BYO, so if you've forgotten the wine, you'll have to descend into the bowels of the shopping centre opposite to find a bottle shop. Fortunately, we found Michael, a wealth of information about Italian wines, who helped us through a good selection.

Then there's the interior of Cibo e Vino: a spartan cafe with a drinks fridge in the corner. Bright screen prints and blocks of colour on the walls. One wall is a vast canvas of autumn plum red punctuated by a wooden frame through which you can see the kitchen and it's not pretty.

None of the other diners look even remotely fazed by any of this, it has to be said. Older couples and younger ones, a man and his wife schmoozing a client, families in various configurations, they all tuck in with hearty appetite.

The waitress, a young woman, handles them and us with aplomb. Only the amount of food we have ordered disconcerts her for a moment. Politely, she warns us.

Now we agree. The portions are more than generous and we'd be happy with half on the plate at the same price. Cibo e Vino is more than worth it.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2008/07/18/1216163138639.html>