

Joanna Blythman reviews Bia Bistro, Edinburgh



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Number 19 Colinton Road, Edinburgh, has been home to a procession of restaurants.

Why none of them has lasted is a bit of a mystery. Merchiston is a heavily populated area of well-to-do households. Logic dictates that a decent neighbourhood restaurant here should do well. Perhaps that's been the problem – in previous incarnations, number 19 just hasn't been special enough.

Things have taken a significant turn for the better, though, with the opening of Bia Bistrot. On the Saturday I visited, the place was hopping: we only just got a table. And I can see why. Word must be out that the cooking here is pretty damn good – you can tell that those at the stove have a sound professional training – yet the prices are restrained. Lunch and early-evening menus, in particular, are a steal.

Bia isn't another outfit ploughing the same predictable furrow as scores of others. The menu shows some originality, and it talks up to people, not down, which is admirable. Outside London, it's bold to put roasted beef marrow on your menu. Even though it's faithful to the adventurous spirit of Fergus Henderson of London restaurant St John and his "nose to tail eating", it won't play well with wimpish diners. We poked out the creamy, jellied marrow with a tiny spoon, spread it on toast, daubed on a mild-mannered red onion compote and sprinkled over a few crystals of sea salt. It was fun to eat and the gelatinous marrow filled the mouth with gentle, meaty flavour. Delicate and not at all macho, only a sourer, less pappy loaf would have upped the game.

The potato and truffle terrine with its leek vinaigrette was a step up in terms of cooking skill and complexity, and indicative of a menu which will also please those in search of vegetarian dishes. The chef had used the inimitable Carroll's Heritage potatoes. Which variety? I don't know, but they were fantastically floury and tasty – a reminder of what a proper spud should be like. If cold potato sounds unappetising, take it from me that the opposite was the case. The truffle element was handled, as it should be, with discretion, and the minutely chopped leek dressing underscored the affinity of potatoes and members of the Allium family. This was a dish I'll remember for months.

The same applies to the champ potatoes (mash with spring onions) that came with the belly of Gloucester Old Spot pork. I could eat a pot-load. More of an elite pomme puree than a quotidian mash, its velvety smoothness and richness probably owed much to decadent amounts of cream and butter. The pork itself had the character you only get in the older, fatter pig breeds, now worryingly classed as "rare". My only gripe is that the skin could have been crisper.

As the rare breed appearance indicates, Bia appears to be an establishment that is serious about provenance, so when you get beetroot it's organic and accompanied not by the usual suspect – cheap, French goat log – that turns up like a bad penny in ropey restaurants, but Ragstone, the artisan cheese supplied by the excellent Iain Mellis. The freshness of the whole plaice, served on the bone under a spill of buttery brown shrimp, tomato concasse and crusty sauteed potatoes, suggested a sound fish supplier. A side order of roasted root vegetables proved rather compelling in its own right.

I should have guessed from the moist homemade soda bread which owed its teak-brown colour to the addition of sweet stout that the kitchen is as strong in the pastry department as it is in the savoury one. The dark chocolate pot was light and aristocratic, almost custard-like in texture, and the idea of serving it with a shot of hazelnut liqueur on the rocks was inspired: it underscored the sophistication of this beautifully executed dessert. I have been cocky about my own apple crumble, but Bia's offering, with its crunchy debris of nutty, friable, crumbly bits has humbled me and may yet cause me to tinker with my recipe.

On this form, Bia certainly deserves to stay the course.

Bia Bistrot,

19 Colinton Road,

Edinburgh

0131 452 8453

Lunch £10.99

Dinner £10.99-27

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