

The secret is out

Review

Zazu's Kitchen

45 Jamaica Street, Stokes Croft, Bristol. Tel: 01179 232233

Within a few minutes of me posting a Twitter message that Zazu's Kitchen may just be one of Bristol's best-kept secrets, I received another message ticking me off.

The tongue-in-cheek comment was from a well-known Bristol chef joking that his wife wasn't happy I was telling everybody how good this Stokes Croft café is.

As it's one of her favourite haunts, she was worried that my review would mean the place would get so busy that she wouldn't get her usual table in future.

I know how she feels. When you find a place that's that little bit special, part of you wants to shout about it from the rooftops, but part of you wants to keep it to yourself.

As a reviewer, it's a difficult conundrum as there have been many places over the years that I have reviewed favourably, only to find it difficult to get into afterwards.

Still, we can't be too precious about these things and the more people check out great local places, the better.

Zazu's Kitchen appeared on these pages last autumn, which might seem a little soon to go back but it's with good reason because it has just launched in the evenings for the first time with a completely different menu and a very different feel.

By day, this elegant café opposite notorious Turbo Island is a light and airy place serving



Left, a tower of mango and lime mousse with mango sorbet; above, Zazu's Kitchen is located opposite Turbo Island in Stokes Croft

breakfast, lunch, tea and coffee. Now, it has extended its hours to Thursday and Friday evening with a set menu consisting of three choices per course.

Owner Toby Bywater took over Zazu's Kitchen last year after working for Raymond Blanc.

He had always wanted to run his own place and such is this café's popularity that there was demand for evening opening, especially since the opening of Hamilton House Canteen opposite has brought so many new people into the area.

Bywater and chef Will Beasley have devised a menu that majors on locally sourced produce and uses a number of quality local suppliers including meat from butcher Dave Giles of Gloucester Road and sausages from Vincent Castellano.

On Thursday and Friday evenings, the back of Zazu's Kitchen is turned into an impromptu bistro, with eight tables lit by candles.

The scrubbed pine tables are decorated with tulips in old

bottles, shelves are lined with books and there is a comfortable leather sofa.

Music – chosen by former DJ Bywater – is chilled out with a distinctly reggae and acid jazz feel. It's like being at a rather good house party or a 'pop-up' restaurant in somebody's flat.

The small open kitchen in the middle of the room adds to this homely ambience as the chefs huddle around a six-ring gas stove and waiting staff watch and wait for each dish to be served.

The food is simple, unpretentious and fairly seasonal.

And it's very well-priced at £19 for three courses or £16 for two courses. House wine is £8 for a 500ml carafe or £2.25 for a small glass.

On the owner's recommendation, I went for a bottle of Les Dechenes Viognier (£19.50) which was a peachy delight of a wine and perfect with the starter and main course.

Starters I didn't order included pea and mint soup and moules mariniere, while main courses I didn't sample included harissa-spiced rump of lamb with sweet potato purée, (decidedly unseasonal) broad beans and roasted sweet peppers and homemade ravioli with Ruddles cheese and spinach with toasted pine nuts and sage butter.

I kicked off with the pear, Roquefort and watercress salad with roasted walnut vinaigrette.

Presentation-wise, it would have looked more exciting plumped up in a bowl rather than spread out on a small plate but it certainly delivered on the flavour front. The cubes of creamy, ripe,

blue-veined cheese were mixed in with peppery rocket and unadvertised lamb's lettuce and coated in a very punchy dressing.

I followed this with the largest fillet of John Dory I have ever seen. A huge, thick and meaty piece of perfectly cooked fish, it was incredibly fresh and I later discovered that it had been delivered that morning direct from Cornwall.

It was served with a pool of slightly sweet and aniseedy Pernod sauce made with a good fish stock and served with some sautéed slices of courgette and mange tout (rather than the advertised French beans).

There were also a few knobbly Anya potatoes (or were they Pink Fir Apples?) to make this quite a plate of food for the money.

To finish, one of new pastry chef David Woodhouse's beautiful creations – a sponge-based tower of mango and lime mousse served in a crunchy brandy basket served with a ball of intensely flavoured mango sorbet.

As I sipped my double espresso and surveyed the room full of hip young things having a great time, it dawned on me just what a fabulous little place this is, although it may not be such a best-kept secret now. Sorry, guys.

MARK TAYLOR

VERDICT

Wheelchair access: No
Prices (Thurs/Fri evenings): Two courses £16, three courses £19

Food: 8/10
Service: 8/10
Atmosphere: 8/10
Value: 8/10
Overall: 8/10



John Dory with Pernod sauce at Zazu's Kitchen