

the Scoffer

Grove's bellissima broad cancels all flights to Milan, happy enough to sate her healthy appetite for all things Italian at Arturo on Connaught Street

It's a familiar experience, though none the less traumatising for that. 'Come on,' says a friend (always the same friend, the one whose taste-buds must have been fried at birth), 'we're just going out for a plate of pasta. Just an hour or so. Five of us. Won't be expensive. £25.' Deploying hypnotic powers which would, in a fairer, saner world be prohibited by the Geneva Convention, she has you pinned into the corner seat at a 'cheerful' local 'Italian' place before you can axe her with the pepper-mill which, at some stage in the evening, will be dangled over a plate of indigestible penne by a leering, pallid-skinned refugee from Kosovo (or, quite possibly, Croydon).

Three and a half hours later, as the tiramisu and third bottle of Barolo coagulate in a curdling, intestinal embrace, the bill arrives: £55-a-head. You swear you'll never have 'a quick plate of pasta' ever again; at least not this side of Milan airport.

But it doesn't have to be this way. Take a walk down Connaught Street to an establishment called Arturo. It is, admittedly, eerily close to Connaught Square, where one day St Tony will take up residence. But, don't be deterred: Arturo lacks the pretension and mindless expense that the 'First Family' find so reassuring. It does, it is true, have a Tuscan red at £179.95; but it also has something called Barbera D'Alba Parpan, 2001, at £19.95, which bears no paint stripper trace, while the house Pinot Grigio (Ca'Lurghetta, 2003) is astonishingly palatable, in a pear-droppy way, at £14.95.

But then Arturo appears to treat wine with appropriate reverence: bottles are spot-lit in rectangular alcoves which embellish a false wall (clad in a sort of suede which sweeps down over a banquette; other seats are upholstered in spongy taupe). There is clean, new wood on the floor, and smoky music – smokier as the evening lengthens – emerging from somewhere to fill this small space in W2, one which is uncluttered without being austere. If you momentarily wonder what the blinds over the windows in the far wall are intended to obscure (car park? mortuary?), tiger prawns – irresistibly pan-fried in chilli oil, with a tomato and roquet salad (three for £7; six for £13.50) – wrench your attention back to your plate, an explosion of taste utterly unrelated to the banal wooliness too often associated with a routine dish. (Infused oil, incidentally, is something of a trademark: besides the untainted extra virgin for focaccia-dunking, there's a bowlful enriched with chilli, garlic, rosemary and half a herb garden.). A finger bowl comes unbidden – emblematic of service by house-trained, sentient adults.

Resisting the pasta, the Scoffer's accomplice negotiated slow roasted pork on crispy polenta, with grilled aubergine glazed in balsamic vinegar (£13.50) – and pronounced complete satisfaction. Roast partridge on a crisp potato cake with a mixed berry sauce (£15) emulated that success, though the accompanying spinach was a little over-salted.

Cheese-breaths might be diverted to a three-way assortment (taleggio, parmesan and gorgonzola, with pear and honey chutney: £7.50), but panacotta (£5.50), encircled by a tide of poached fruits (peach, mango, blueberry, kiwi) and vanilla syrup (for the accomplice) and dark chocolate mousse with raspberry coulis (£5.50) – both of them teetering on faultlessness – meant that dwarf mince pies and macaroons (a gratis bon bouche, accompanying mint tea) could be ignored without angst (and the Milan flight put on hold).

Arturo, 23 Connaught Street, W2; 020 7706 3388
£35-£40-a-head. Lunch menu: three courses £15.95. Opening hours: Mon-Sat 12pm-2.30pm (Sun 12.30pm-3.30pm) and 6-10pm (Sun 6pm-9.30pm)

Opening soon? If you'd like The Scoffer to consider taking a bite, email her at scoffer@grovemagazine.co.uk

