

Restaurant Review

Al Boccon Di'Vino

14 Red Lion Street, Richmond upon Thames TW9 1RW: 0208 940 9060

A divine mouthful

Perhaps the most unusual place we have yet reviewed, MATTHEW WILLIAMS paid a visit to Al Boccon Di'Vino, a literally menu-less restaurant in Richmond

I SHOULD have known to expect the unexpected when, having spent the day at Shepperton Studios, I mentioned my evening's restaurant review venture to my tour guide (someone who is used to bumping into the likes of Sir Ridley Scott, Martin Scorsese and Johnny Depp on a daily basis, after all). 'It's great,' he laughed. 'Bit different though!' And so it proved.

Certainly one of the most unusual restaurants I've been to, and definitely the most fun, Richmond's Al Boccon Di'Vino has rewritten the rule book when it comes to dining out.

It was a miserable Thursday evening when we stepped off the washed out streets of Richmond (within walking distance of the train station), away from the neon glare of the neighbouring Odeon cinema and into, seemingly, another world.

Barely had we sat down among our intimate surroundings (it feels like you've walked into an eccentric Italian's front room), than the smiling waitress asked for our wine choice – red or white? No list, just a colour choice ('the chef will recommend you something if you'd like'). Had we eaten here before? 'You know there's no menu, right? Oh, and would you like a glass of prosecco?' (Two glasses had already been poured).

Open just over 18 months, Al Boccon Di'Vino (a divine mouthful in Veneto, apparently) has created such a buzz that neighbouring diners spoke of three-week waits for weekend bookings – for entertainment value alone, I'm not surprised.

When I had heard about the no menu policy, I have to admit, I'd originally assumed that meant a changing daily specials board, but it turned out to be more of a blind date.

With toasts raised, the first dishes found their way to the table – much like visiting a knowledgeable and cheffy grandparent, you'll eat what you're given and you'll eat a lot of it, too – I would imagine that any dietary requirements would have to be highlighted in advance, as we didn't have any choice in the matter on the day.

Chef's instructions

Frittata, salade de la mer, polpette and chicken Milanese dishes were settled down amongst the glasses of wine (we were given a Pillastro Selezione d'Oro 2007) and plates of Italian crispbreads – chef Riccardo, apparently a food writer himself in his native Italy, offering advice as to eating orders – 'this one is fine cold, but you must eat this now'. Slightly intimidating and very unorthodox, but having walked past chain upon chain upon chain on our way to Al Boccon, thoroughly refreshing.

An Italian whirlwind came and went: olives in mascarpone, minestrone soup, salad and salami... I have to confess that the mounting courses had me nervously adding up the potential cost in my head (reassuringly reasonable at £38 a head for the quality and quantity, as it turned out, but a potentially unsettling experience).

Three types of pasta were despatched

– some neighbouring guests pleaded a ceasefire at this point, but the majority seemed to be thoroughly enthralled by the no-frills but fully flavoured cooking.

With a flourish, the pièce de résistance, a still sizzling lamb, was promenaded among the diners (a packed house) before being carved up and served – it was stunningly tender.

Sweet teeth were satisfied with a panna cotta before an extremely strong cheese was served – even my fromaggio loving fiancée was slightly taken aback by its power – and almost four hours after the experience began the bill was settled.

For the adventurous diner, Al Boccon Di'Vino is a not-to-be-missed experience. While perhaps not for everyone, once you adjust to the fact that you have no control over where your evening is heading, it even becomes relaxing and fun (although you may be left slightly punch drunk by the whole experience, wondering what on earth you've just been through!). More restaurants should be like this.

Verdict:

Food and drink 10
Service 10
Venue 10

What we ate:

Set 'menu' at £38 a head

Drinks:

A bottle of Pillastro Selezione d'Oro 2007: £20