

Going out: Hidden in plain sight in Temple Bar

This new wine bar with fancy tapas at €3 each shows promise

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Piglet

Lane, Temple Bar, Dublin 2

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Italian



Uncertainty has marked every step to this table. I'm bewildered on a phone in Dublin's Temple Bar, getting a friend to look something up. Google has a big fat nothing. The food writer whose words sent me here is locked behind a paywall.

Where is this winebar called Piglet on Cows Lane? Could it be a fever dream brought on by the meat sweats? I'm certain I checked the previous day that they were open for lunch and had to shout over the noise of a crowd to be heard on the phone. But now Cows Lane is all but deserted and there are just two food places, neither of them called Piglet.

We have to go with the notion that Piglet is La Dolce Vita, the cheesily named wine bar where I last ate a sausage sandwich while sitting on a window seat beside a model of the cafe made out of bottle tops.

The friend and I plunge in. Actually we sit outside first until we realise that the sun is rapidly retreating, leaving us in wintry shadow and seek warmth inside the cafe, which still looks exactly like it did when it was La Dolce Vita.

Except for one game-changing difference. Here's a menu that gives off a sun-warmed glow of its own. It's speckled with ingredients that don't make it onto territory in this price range. Smoked eel, goat bacon and an anchovy foam are not terms generally seen on a €3 tapas list.

The anchovy foam will turn out to have been a bit of an oversell, but nevertheless happiness breaks out. Nothing else is new, but the menu reads like a set of buttons with lightbulbs beside them. Ding. Yes. Ding. Yes. We shall have all of the above and then move onto the salads and pastas.

On the decor front, Piglet is a work in progress. I'd be the first one to give out about money being spent on furniture instead of food, so I'm clamping the calamitous wobble of our upper floor table under foot and getting on with it. We're in student chic land here, all flaccid cushions, bric-a-brac and wine boxes stacked on the stairs. No hipster tropes have been harmed in the making of this cafe.

Those tapas are mouthfuls, served on Le Levain sourdough toasts. Next time I'm having all of them (yes, duck gizzard with garlic butter, I'm talking about you), but for the moment there's a slice of smoked eel on white bean puree. Fish and bean are the same sludgy ivory colour, the smoke and mealy sweetness grounded in the crunch of great toast. Soft curls of mortadella have a pickled heart artichoke on top for a salt tang hit. The goat bacon is surprisingly delicate, threads of kid soft meat that prove you can do more to goat than curry it. An oyster is perfect. Its anchovy foam is more like a piping of cream on toast that doesn't taste of anchovy, which is all a bit 1970s fingerfood weird.

The octopus salad is full of the properly gnarly bits of octopus that you normally have to take a Ryanair flight to find. It is tumbled with good fresh rocket and a pesto made with lovage seeds, which bring a muscular mineral flintiness to the bowl. There's supposed to be an anchovy dressing here too, but I don't detect it and there's plenty going on without it. So one piglet and several anchovies now missing in action.

My friend has a lovely plate of orecchiette, the little ears of pasta that have been served with a simple but excellent mix of silky strips of roasted red peppers, cream and a great Parmesan. The pasta in this dish is cavatelli on the menu, but they're down a few ingredients, after yesterday's rush maybe. These orecchiette are mushroom coloured and perfect, with some kind of vegetable ingredient – I'm guessing aubergine – that adds to the whole satisfying plate of food.

A flourless chocolate tart served with honey drenched sultanas and a panacotta [sic] with "red fruit sauce" are both classic desserts definitely done on the dolce side of the vita.

At the end, the new owner Enrico Fantasia spots us and says hello. The wine and food importer took over La Dolce Vita three months ago and yes, they will be changing the name. It should have already been done by the time you read this. They were looking about the place to come up with a name, he explains and spotted the mezza luna hanging over the door, a cheesy old half-moon knife whose handle is a wooden piglet.

I didn't dream Piglet up, but work in progress wobbles aside, it's exactly the kind of place I would wish into being if I could.

Lunch for two with coffees and a bottle of sparkling water came to €61.

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