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> durrants

Cordon bleu vegan comes to the City

Organic and locally-sourced, Saf's 'raw' food is gimmicky but very good, writes **Zoe Strimpel**

Restaurants

SAF

152-154 CURTAIN ROAD, EC2A 3AT
020 7613 0007

THIS pie-loving country has never seen anything quite like it. Saf is London's first gourmet vegan restaurant, but the exclusion of animal products from its menu is not all that makes Saf an exotic beast.

Chef Chad Sarno brings "raw" cooking with him from his first restaurant in New York, where such oddball methods seem practically standard issue.

Confusingly, this doesn't mean that food is actually raw, but cooked below 48 degrees C. This supposedly prevents vital enzymes from breaking down and so boosts the natural flavour and nutrients of the food.

BIODYNAMIC OR ORGANIC

Gimmicky? Of course: But it's quite nice to know that everything on your plate is plant-based, natural, locally-sourced, seasonal and organic where possible.

That goes for the long and easy-to-use wine list too — everything on it is biodynamic or organic.

Sceptics will say that this raw vegan stuff is all very nice but the food must be inferior. It isn't. Saf's food is, in general,

gorgeously satisfying. The pleasure of eating it, though, is more a function of texture than taste, which — although at times elegant — is still pretty earthy.

The menu is diverse, ranging from Japanese-inspired dishes such as Buddha Bowl — a bowl of rice, smoked tofu and kelp — to caviar made from chive pearls and served with sweet potato latkes and sour cream. We started with a plate of

curiously hollow-tasting wasabi cashews, smoked almonds and impressive citrus olives to go with our pre-dinner drinks, an organic Spanish cava and a superb cocktail of juniper green gin, chamomile nectar, basil, lime and berry bitters from the star in-house mixologist.

BIT LIKE MEAT

Nuts reappeared in our beetroot ravioli — a beautiful quartet of taco-shaped slices filled with cashew herb ricotta and served with balsamic-soaked figs.

The deep purple and zinginess of the beetroot and the soft greyish crumble of the "ricotta" made for just the sort of

contrast this menu relies on to boost a relatively limited variety of ingredients. By the way — crushed cashews taste a bit like meat; we thought of foie gras.

We had to try some "sushi" and went for maki rolls made with parsnip rice (mashing parsnip causes the release of starch so that it becomes sticky, like rice). The shiitake-cucumber filling felt right on the tongue but had very little taste, and was in any case overshadowed by the parsnip flavour.

It didn't taste like sushi, but it felt like it, and was the more interesting for that. Macadamia caprese was astonishingly good; it tasted nothing like mozzarella, of course, but the discs of buttery white nutmeat next to sundried tomatoes and basil oil was moreish in the extreme.

SHOWSTOPPER

Seaweed salad made a break from nuts and a return to the Japanese section of the menu — the bowl of sea lettuce, wakame and yuzu was all health and no taste, although it did come to life slightly with the addition of soy sauce.



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The real showstopper — a dish I'd go back for — was just called "Mushrooms". It was a compact mound that was so meaty, savoury and clean that we were sure we'd found perfection in fungal form — the truffle-infused tahini sauce that came with it and the king oyster "tartare" were

exquisite accompaniments. Lasagna was made from courgettes, walnuts and pesto and came with a shard of butter-rich pine-nut "parmesan" — tasty, but too close to a repetition of the flavours in the caprese.

We just found room for an astonishing pudding of tart lucuma cookie (lucuma is a Peruvian fruit) that was hard and rich and not too sweet, balanced with maca ice cream and goji syrup.

SUPERLATIVE COCKTAILS

Apple Cheesecake was a sweeter, less subtle beast, another nut mixture arriving on coconut crust with vanilla-rum syrup,

apple ice cream and cocoa-dipped berries.

It may be vegan and therefore square, but presented like this, with all the chic design, superlative cocktails and grinning service of its Manhattan original, this is the kind of food we could get used to.

Even so, it might take some adapting — both of us felt very funny in the tummy the next day. Too many nuts, or maybe just too much biodynamic wine. But worth it either way.

DETAILS

FOOD
SERVICE
AMBIENCE



Dinner per head without wine: £35

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The chic design of Saf complements the charm of its earthy, plant-based food