

RESTAURANT REVIEW

Matthew Norman

Is this a tribute restaurant to Sir Alex Ferguson?" inquired my friend hopefully as we took our seats at Saf. Then she added that the acronym by which the Manchester United manager is commonly known "was the only thing I could think of". Mind you, I had asked her to lunch with strict instructions that on no account was she to Google the name of the restaurant to which I'd be taking her, or to indulge in any other research, for fear of ruining the surprise.

No, I replied, it is not. Exactly what a Fergie tribute joint would be, culinarily speaking, is an intriguing question to which I have no answer, other than that it might involve being served several of the heavier clarets by way of intravenous drip. But what it undeniably would not be is an entirely, absolutely and unremittingly vegan restaurant.

"No, no, you're kidding," she said when I finally broke the news. "Please tell me you're kidding."

It was at this moment that our South African waitress appended an excitable, "It's ionised!" to the offer of tap water.

"You're not kidding, are you?" said my friend, morosely. "It's the eve of my birthday, and this is my treat. You're going to hell for this."

She was missing the point, needless to say – the point being that we had already arrived in hell; or at least the closest to hell that two fervent carnivores could wish to find in a long, thin and engaging room done out much as you'd expect of an expensively appointed Shoreditch restaurant. It's something of a mystery as to who, exactly, shelled out all the money on good floor-to-ceiling paint-

ings of floral life forms, exceedingly comfy chairs and quality napery, trendy hanging lamps shaped loosely after a double helix (or possibly, as my friend contended, a herpes culture under

the microscope), a swanky bar at the front and a cute little garden area at the rear.

The brains behind the LifeCo organisation, the American owners of this place and its siblings in Germany and Turkey (Saf being Turkish for "pure"), choose to hide their identity for doubtless the best of reasons, but this anonymity does little to dispel the cultish whiff that goes so naturally with such a concept. "Let food be your medicine," reads the sign screwed into the building's exterior (with wicked cruelty, by the way, the sign on the neighbouring caff screeches "Salt Beef!"), "and medicine be your food. Hippocrates." The old boy should have quit when he was ahead, we felt, after the oath. The first half's OK, but as for the second, well, what are you expected to do? Order a couple of paracetamol and a phial of liquid amoxicillin with the ionised water?

And then, just as we were swapping increasingly rabid escapist fantasies – "Mmm, a huge lamb chop," cooed the dainty Homer Simpson manqué opposite me, "and when you bite into it, the fat oozes all down your chin" – the food began to arrive. And, would you believe it, it wasn't half bad. Boldly eschewing the soft cashew "Boursin" and the beetroot "Ricotta" (who knew about this fruit'n'nut/cheese interface? Certainly not Frank Muir), we shared three starters. Maki roll filled with

"parsnip rice" (in English, mashed parsnip), shiitake mushroom, shiso and citrus shoyu was well made and lively, albeit lacking definitive flavour; white bean hummus, marked with an asterisk on the menu to denote a dish "heated above 48 degrees", was fresh and lighter than the traditional chickpea rendition; and spring dumplings filled with spinach, date, water chestnut and onion may have been a touch heavy, but they were a thoughtful dim sum for all that.

So far, so adequate, then – and so admirable for avoiding falling into the classic veggie restaurant Quorn trap of pretending the dishes are meat-free meat. But then there arrived a main course of genuine savour and cleverness. My friend struggled with her "Saf Bowl", a collation of parsnip rice, sesame oiled noodles, shiitake and various other Nipponese delectables, announcing halfway through that she'd had enough parsnip rice for a lifetime. But my "Buddha Bowl" was a real gem, matching organic jasmine

rice, chillified pickled cabbage and shredded carrot to the finest tofu I've ever eaten, the thick wedges of the meaty-textured soya bean curd glazed with maple syrup and green tea to give them a gloriously smoky-sweet twang.

Taste isn't enough at Saf, of course, so I asked our waitress what it would do for my kidneys. "Once it's inside you," she explained, "it will work its way to where it's needed." She was no Christiaan Barnard, or even a latter-day Hippocrates, but the service is



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friendly and jolly in a “Hey, you guys!” kinda way, the non-alcoholic cocktails are delicious, the room is a pleasure and, given the labour-intensive prettiness of the food (a pudding of pineapple-rose sorbet with caviar-esque strawberry globules was an aesthetic masterpiece), it’s not expensive.

If this sort of thing is your bag – and, yes, Paul McCartney and Gwyneth, I am talking to you – you won’t find it done with more technical adroitness and imagination elsewhere. If not, there’s always the salt beef bar next door to banish the memory.

Saf 6/10

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Address 152-154 Curtain Road,
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Open All week, lunch noon-3.30pm;
dinner 6.30-11pm (bar food menu
and drink 11am-11pm)

THE BILL	
Skin Server cocktail (spinach, cucumber, celery, aloe vera)	£3.75
Long Life cocktail (apple, cucumber, orange, blueberries)	£3.75
White bean hummus	£4
Maki roll	£5
Spring dumplings	£6.50
Saf Bowl	£7.50
Buddha Bowl	£8.50
Pineapple rose sorbet	£5.50
Subtotal	£44.50
Service @12.5%	£5.56
Total	£50.06

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