



Eating out

Nicholas Jones returns this month feeling a little raw...

SAF RESTAURANT

A new vegan restaurant in Shoreditch declared that it was serving up 'simple authentic food', and had abbreviated this motto into its anacronistic name – **SAE**. The problem is that if we take this tag on face value, the food at **SAE** is anything but what it professes to be.

On reflection I don't think you can really say that much of the fare at **SAE** is 'simple', far from it in fact. The dishes are beautifully crafted, a feast for the eyes, and clearly take a lot of skilled technique to make. So hats off to the chef on modus operandi, but let's not try and claim that the food is 'simple' – because it's just not.

Now let's consider its 'authenticity'. To start, my partner plumped for the beetroot ravioli stuffed with cashew herb ricotta and julien strips of asparagus, whilst I opted for the chive pearl caviar served with sour cream. Next came a plate of mixed cheeses, including a trio of boursin with a pair of macadamia and almond cheeses.

For main course I decided to try out **SAE**'s interpretation of lasagne, comprising tapaneda, sage pesto, peppers and courgettes. It came with a small slab of pine nut parmesan, which – I was told by the very friendly waitress – I wouldn't be able to tell apart from the real thing... Except I could. It didn't taste like genuine parmesan, more like a distant cousin (twice removed) that shared some similar strands of DNA, but had become more dusty, less creamy, and all together much less dairy-like than its distant cousin had been – back in the good old days, when cheese was cheese... My other half went for a bowl of the ravioli that, she found, tasted vaguely similar to most of everything else she'd eaten that night yet "slightly different".

The theme continued to dessert, where an apple cheesecake tasted pretty much like an authentic cheese cake, but with an undercurrent of nuts. Lots of maximisation of flavours, good cooking, but still an imitation of something else by the same

name that got there first. That is to say if the first ever 'cheesecake' in history had been made of completely dairy-free products, this dish could very well claim to be the genuine article. The thing is, however, it didn't.

So we had a meal with lots of beautiful dishes, excellent presentation, fantastic attention to detail, a cunning use of ingredients and skilled cookery, yet still I wasn't convinced. Is this because I'm really addicted to red meat, dairy and all those other 'naughty' things that vegan cooking rejects? Or is it simply because there is only so much you can do without these products? I recommend that you all go down and eat there, and make your own judgment. I'm still not sure whether I like this place or not.

A meal for two with wine and service costs approximately £75. **SAE Restaurant, 152-154 Curtain Road, EC2A 3AT; 020 7613 0007.**

