

# It's crunch time

*Safa serves raw, experimental food in a fast-paced, designer setting. Can it put the va-va-voom into vegetarianism?*

WORDS BY TERRY DURACK

PHOTOGRAPH BY LUCA ZAMPEDRI



Restaurant critic of the year

It's the energy that hits you. Everyone at **Safa** is full of it. They're off their faces with it. Waitresses can barely stand still long enough to take an order, bar staff shout cheery greetings to everyone who walks in and

chefs happily chat to customers who stop by the open kitchen. So that's what happens when you ditch meat and dairy, stick to plant-based foods and add alcohol. Wow.

**Safa** is Turkish for "pure", but there is nothing too pure or innocent about a room full of twenty- and thirty-somethings tucking into lethal-looking cocktails, organic wines, sweet-potato latkes and mint-chip ice-cream sundaes. They just look as if they are enjoying themselves. And so am I. At. A. Vegetarian. Restaurant.

Not just vegetarian, but vegan. The menu is 100 per cent plant-based, with no dairy, eggs, or animal products, and much of the food is raw or cooked to less than 48C. There are already three Safs in Turkey and one in Munich, and another is slated for west London. I like that it doesn't scream wholewheat, stone-ground vegetarian, but is just like any other cool, friendly Shoreditch diner with its long bar, fabulous light fittings, modern wooden tables and booths and small outside terrace. The crowd, like the staff, is young, casual and smiley.

Safa's Boston-born exec chef, Chad Sarno, and head chef David Bailey, previously at Notting Hill's E&O, have ventured where other chefs fear to tread, going in with new kitchen technology, dehydrators and Pacojets blazing. Ordering from the menu

is like leaping into the dark – who knows what to expect from "caviar" chive pearls or "macadamia Caprese"?

Little spring dumplings filled with spinach, onion, date and water chestnut (£6) have sweetness and crunch, and a black vinegar dip adds kick, but a "lasagne" (£10.50) is more a euphemism than a lasagne. A high moulded round of layered courgettes, walnuts, sage pesto and olive relish, it's heavy, nutty, mulchy, and, I have to say, vegetarian. A pan-Asian Buddha bowl (£8.50) has more character; the generous serve of well-cooked jasmine rice set off by sweet, smoky tofu steaks, glossy, garlicky greens and chilli-flecked kim-chee cabbage. Flavours bounce from sweet to spicy but remain in harmony.

The best dish, however, is the one with the least done to it: a pretty platter of earthy, slow-roasted beetroot cubes is

hit with a vibrant beet reduction, walnut "chutney" and a whack of freshly grated horseradish (£5), proving that beetroot is gorgeous in its own right.

While the labour-intensive food is good value, the wine is strangely punishing. I'm happy to pay extra for organic, biodynamic or sustainable, but not £71 for a Muddy Water New Zealand Pinot Noir. Being on my £80 budget for two, I have to settle on an Era Primitivo red from Apulia for £18, about which the best thing I can say is that I can afford it.

Working with a plant-based agenda could get boring and one-dimensional, but Sarno miraculously keeps up the interest with different techniques, fermentations and reductions. There is flavour, thank the lord, in everything. It is only towards the end that a recurring granular pastiness creeps in among the "cheeses" and puddings. An apple "cheesecake" made with a coconut lemon crust and flavoured with vanilla rum

syrup is cleverly crafted but still leaves me craving cheesecake. Likewise, the caprese of soft "cheese" made from cultured, fermented macadamia milk teamed with squidgy, semi-dried tomatoes is ingenious, but still leaves me craving cheese.

What's nice about **Safa** is that you bounce out feeling better than you went in. This is inventive, modern, vegetarian cooking that, hallelujah, is fun to eat. If you don't eat meat or dairy, you don't mind nuts, and you are sick of being treated as a problem every time you dine out, you're going to love it. And the rest of us will have no problem coming along for the ride. ■

## 14/20

SCORES 1-9 STAY HOME AND COOK 10-11 NEEDS HELP 12 OK 13 PLEASANT ENOUGH 14 GOOD 15 VERY GOOD 16 CAPABLE OF GREATNESS 17 SPECIAL, CAN'T WAIT TO GO BACK 18 HIGHLY HONOURABLE 19 UNIQUE AND MEMORABLE 20 AS GOOD AS IT GETS

### Safa

152-154 Curtain Road, London EC2,  
tel: 020 7613 0007

Lunch and dinner daily. Around £75 for two, including wine and service

Read Terry Durack's new column at [independent.co.uk/eat](http://independent.co.uk/eat)

### Second helpings

#### More vaunted vegans

##### Vita Organic

74 Wardour Street, London W1,  
tel: 020 7734 8986

Totally vegan, this friendly, easygoing Soho café specialises in live, enzymatic and gently cooked food, from Thai-style tom yum soup to raw lasagne with pesto

##### Demuth's

2 North Parade Passage, Bath, Somerset,  
tel: 01225 446 059

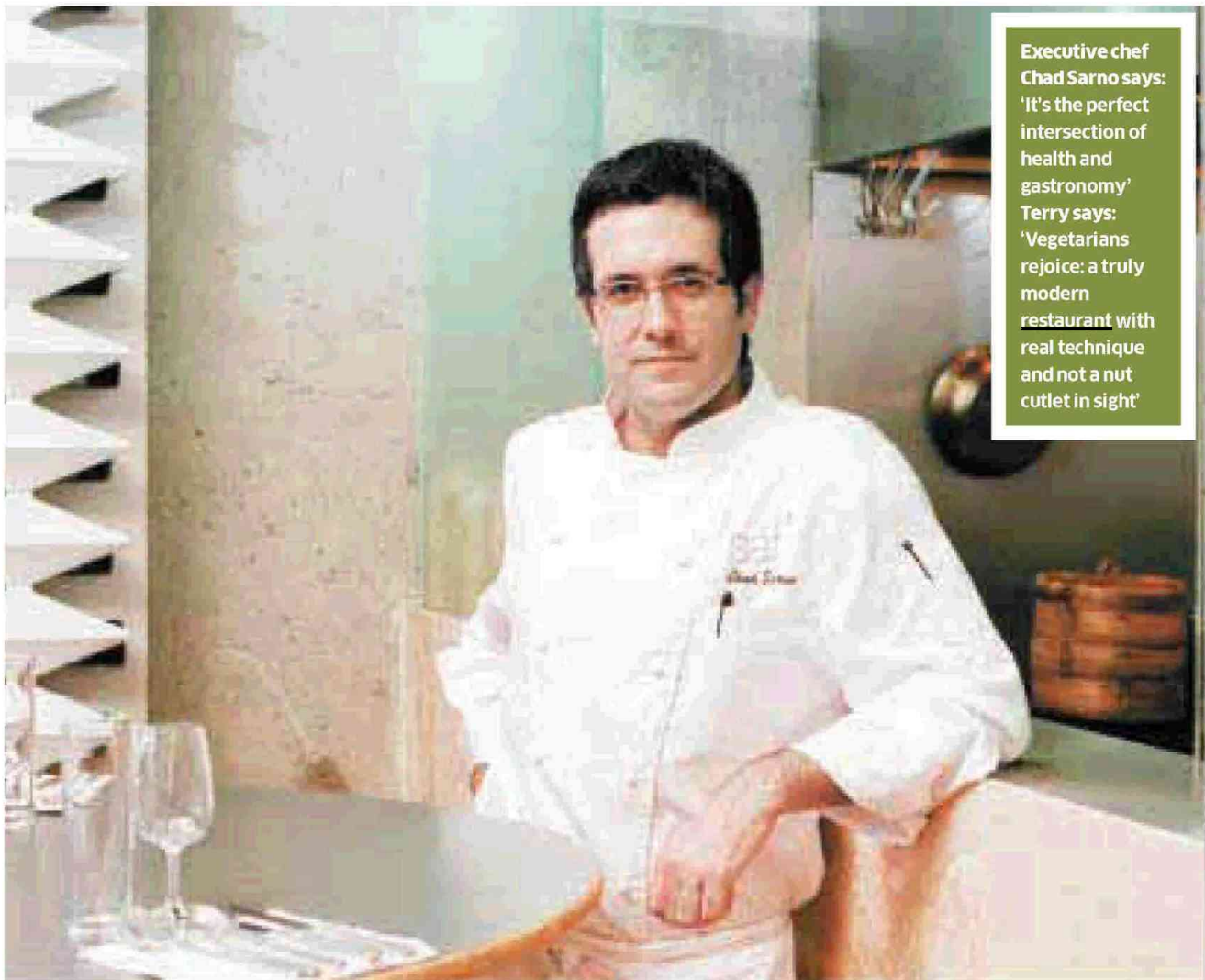


Located in a Georgian townhouse, Bath's favourite vegetarian serves a range of dedicated vegan dishes. Everyone orders the famous vegan chocolate cake

**David Bann**

**56-58 St. Mary's Street, Edinburgh,  
tel: 0131 556 5888**

Specialises in inventive vegetarian food. Offers several vegan dishes, with more that can be made vegan to order, such as an artichoke, pea and mint risotto



**Executive chef Chad Sarno says:**  
'It's the perfect intersection of health and gastronomy'  
**Terry says:**  
'Vegetarians rejoice: a truly modern restaurant with real technique and not a nut outlet in sight'