

BOWLED OVER



IT IS SAID THE WAY FOOD IS PLATED INFLUENCES OUR PERCEPTION OF CULINARY CREATIVITY. GISELLE WHITEAKER TESTS THE THEORY THAT COMFORT FOOD IS BEST IN BOWLS.

"Whenever I travel, I bring a bowl home with me," explains Russian-born, Le Cordon Bleu London-trained Zarifa Ragimova, indicating towards the bowls now hanging on the wall at BOWLS Soho. My boyfriend Elio and I are sitting in Zarifa's restaurant, which opened its doors a few short months ago, admiring the bright hues. It's fun, it's funky, and it's already packed with punters.

Food bowls have been trending on Instagram for some time now and Zarifa is clearly riding that wave, focusing on the comfort foods that don't quite work on plates. She describes the choices of cuisine as being "dishes to hold, to pick from and pass around, packed with layered flavours and unique ingredient combinations."

Living in Japan many years ago, I developed a phobia about food in small bowls. These often contained pungent, intensely flavoured, oddly textured foodstuff, unidentifiable to the Western palate. It's time for me to overcome my food-bowl fears.

A glance at the menu confirms an eclectic origin; South East Asia, South America and the Caribbean have all made their mark, with flavours ranging from jerk to pho and poke. The list is divided into "To Start With" Starters and "Greedy Bowl" Mains and we order a broad selection. Then there's the tempting cocktail list, with intriguing takes on old favourites, like the Bloody Marley, a mixture of Sagatiba cristallina, cannabidiol cnb Botanical Tea, bloody mary mix, lemon

TOP AND ABOVE
The cocktails at BOWLS are superb; comfort food comes in bowls.

and tomato juice that packs a punch; and new favourites like the Painkiller Slush, with Gosling's rum, Koko Kanu Original Jamaican rum, orange, pineapple and coconut; or Bitter 'n' Stormy, with Gosling's rum, Campari, passion fruit, lime, and Pimento ginger beer.

We've had merely a few sips when our first dish arrives, a side of truffled courgette fries, the golden batter light and crisp. We dip each stem into tangy Romanesco sauce, licking the salt from our fingers. Just as we finish, our BBQ Jerk chicken wings arrive, three full wings in a neat stack, served with slivers of mango and spring onion. They're marked with a chili on the menu, so we take delicate nibbles to test the heat, rating the spice level as minimal, but the deep, smoky flavour as maximal.

Our fingers sticky, we both reach for a BBQ glazed pork belly bao, the soft bun melting around the tender meat, BBQ sauce threatening to dribble down our arms. This is not first-date food; this is food you consume with someone who will forgive the smears of sauce on your face.

Our two big-bowl dishes arrive together. Served in a simple white bowl, the portion of braised beef cheek is generous, sitting on a mound of sweet potato mash, with slender pickled carrots and a measure of sauerkraut. It's a simple dish, yet immensely satisfying, the beef cheek melting in the mouth. Like the Jerk, the Jamaican goat curry, served with rice 'n' peas in a glazed blue bowl, is marked as spicy, but a few days later I notice it's been relegated to the mild category, where it belongs. It is though, delicious, its popularity testament to its flavourful impact.

The dessert menu is a work in progress, with new dishes currently under development. We're happy with the chocolate truffle cake with mixed berries. It's gooey and rich - everything a dessert should be - and rather dramatically plated on a shallow blue and white bowl that's almost an optical illusion, drawing the eye to the food in its centre. But that may just be the cocktails talking.

BOWLS touts the idea that the best things come in bowls. They might be right. I'm already planning a return visit to try the Bibimbap, a spicy rice dish from Korea. There may even be a DJ on the decks on my next visit - BOWLS is that kind of place, part restaurant, part party and all fun.

To learn more about BOWLS or to book a table, see www.bowlsrestaurants.co.uk



FROM TOP DOWN:
Jerk chicken; Zari-pho; miso-glazed aubergine.



ABOVE
Every bowl is a delight