



Pistachio and basil pesto

Pasta Perfection

Do you know your pappardelle from potato gnocchi and rigatoni from ravioli? If not, it's time to make your way to Emilia's Crafted Pasta. Giselle Whiteaker learns not all pasta is equal.

Emilia's Crafted Pasta may be a London institution – there are outlets in Aldgate and St Katharine Docks – but the pasta transports diners on a wave of flavour to a trattoria in Italy. The eatery in St Katharine Docks is buzzing this Wednesday evening. My boyfriend Elio's Italian heritage has dragged us out into the chilly winter night and we shed

layers as we pick our way through diners to a vacant table, of which there are few. A row of four tables for two runs down the centre of the room; there are six counter seats; and ten further spots at the counter that runs from the side wall across the front window.



Burrata with toasted sourdough Pugliese bread



Four-hour slow-cooked béchamel Bolognese



Vegan lentil ragu

The noise level ebbs and wanes as food makes its way to the tables, causing conversation to halt. Delicious scents swirl through the cosy space: tomato, basil, parmesan and bread. We quickly peruse the paper tablemat that doubles as a menu, appreciating the sketches of the pasta on offer. Andrew Macleod, the founder of Emilia's, confesses to a pasta obsession, which explains why the shapes move beyond the regulars: fettucine, spaghetti and penne. Instead, rigatoni, pappardelle, bucatini and casarecce are front and centre, with gnocchi and ravioli also making an appearance. "No two pasta makers create the exact same pasta, hence why it is considered a craft," says Andrew, who also delights in the intersection of flavour and geometry, pairing shapes and flavours to marvellous effect.

Our server, Katarina, hails from Italy, adding authenticity to our experience. She walks us through the menu, gently guiding our decision-making. We start with the burrata with toasted sourdough Pugliese bread, drizzled with extra virgin olive oil. The bundle of fresh Italian cow milk cheese reveals its creamy centre with the light press of a knife and we scoop the cheese onto our plates along with slices of red and green tomato, sprinkled with herbs. The green tomato is firm, almost crunchy, with a slight citrus tinge, while the red tomato melts in a sweet burst. We nibble on the fluffy salted bread between mouthfuls, the olive oil softening our lips. "Every meal should start like this," sighs Elio contentedly.

It isn't long before the pasta makes its way to us. We've opted for a non-traditional smoked salmon carbonara with pecorino and beaten eggs and a more traditional Bolognese, albeit a four-hour slow-cooked béchamel Bolognese with lashings of grated parmesan. According to the menu, this pappardelle al ragu hails from Imola, a town on the Santerno River to the west of Bologna. I immediately add it to my list of foodie must-visit destinations.

There's so much parmesan on the Bolognese that we can barely see the pasta beneath the flakes. This gives me cause for concern, but when I dig in, I find the cheese to be a surprisingly gentle companion for the rich sauce and pappardelle. As I savour the flavours, I notice the message on the back of one of the server's T-shirts: "Don't ever let a recipe tell you how much cheese to put on your pasta. You measure that with your heart."

While the Bolognese sauce is lighter than I expect, the carbonara is intense. The smoked salmon substitute – we could've opted for the standard pancetta – is an eye-opener. The rich flavours explode on the palate, tamed by the bucatini. This spaghetti-like pasta is hollow, bringing some levity to the powerful dish. "It's the pasta that makes this dish," says Elio, examining a strand on his fork. "It makes it more unusual, in both flavour and texture."

The portions are generous, but we don't let that get in the way of After Pasta, otherwise known as dessert. It's only when the dishes land on the table that we realise we should have agreed on one. Instead, we have a slab of salted caramel chocolate brownie with vanilla ice-cream and Emilia's Special. "Oops," I mutter, resigning myself to an extra gym session this week.

The brownie is delicious, firm on the outside, fudge-like on the inside, but it's the Emilia's Special that grabs our attention. Just like all the best Italian food, the dish is simple: large scoops of vanilla ice-cream topped with crushed amaretti and cantuccini (biscotti) and, this is the kicker, honey. The latter transports me back to my childhood, when honey drizzled on ice-cream was one of my favourite desserts. The honey firms into a delightfully thick, gooey consistency, ensuring the ice-cream dissolves first, ending with a burst of sweetness. The biscuits hint at almonds, but their contribution is more about texture, as they retain their crunch. Our spoons soon meet in the middle of the bowl, Elio scoring the final scoop.

Our cheeks and hearts are warm as we prepare to exit into the night. We are left with words of wisdom from Katarina's shirt: "Take life one day and one pasta shape at a time."

For more information, menus or booking at Emilia's Crafted Pasta or to register interest in their soon-to-come pasta masterclasses, see www.emiliaspasta.com



Emilia's Special is drizzled with honey

PROPERTY PAGES



Pancetta Carbonara

This carbonara recipe represents the simplicity of Italian food, and reflects how hard it can be to get it perfect. There are different ways of cooking it in different regions of Italy but Andrew favours the Northern Italian method of using whole eggs to make it a little lighter. Pecorino is always used over parmesan, along with plenty of pancetta and pepper. Andrew's twist is to use bucatini, which ensures the creamy sauce is distributed perfectly.

Ingredients

- 125g dried bucatini pasta
- 1 tbsp olive oil
- 60g pancetta
- 1 egg
- 2 tbsp grated pecorino

Cooking Method

Bring a large saucepan of water to the boil and season generously with salt. Add the pasta and cook for 8–9 minutes. While the pasta cooks, put a frying pan over a medium-high heat and pour in the oil. Add the pancetta and cook until it's very crispy on the outside but still slightly chewy – add a splash of water if it starts to brown too much.

In a mixing bowl, crack in the egg and add a generous pinch of fresh ground black pepper. Add the grated pecorino. Beat the mix to a creamy liquid.

Drain the pasta, saving some of the cooking water. Tip the pasta into the frying pan with the pancetta and toss to thoroughly coat the pasta in the oil. Remove the pan from the heat and pile the pasta into a mound at one side of the pan. Pour the egg mixture over the mound of pasta so it coats it, but doesn't immediately touch the bottom of the hot pan.

Use a spatula to continually stir and mix the pasta and sauce so it doesn't scramble, but warms through and becomes creamy, coating the pasta. If the sauce is too thick, add 1–2 tbsp of the reserved pasta water. If it's too thin, carefully cook over a very low heat to thicken it.

Finish with a little extra grated pecorino and black pepper.