

Primrose Cafe & Bistro

1 Clifton Arcade, Boyces Avenue, Clifton Village, Bristol.
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It's been a good year for the Primrose Cafe & Bistro. The arrival of new head chef Tara Hofman in January has breathed new life into this Clifton stalwart and owner Patrick Glennie-Smith has been rewarded handsomely by seeing his beloved restaurant enter the notoriously hard-to-please Which? Good Food Guide for the first time.

Such recognition for Hofman has come relatively early for her as this is her first head chef role, but then she's no novice, having worked previously under Barney Houghton at Quartier Vert and Stephen Markwick at Markwicks before that.

The Primrose is the epitome of the no-nonsense neighbourhood restaurant and it occupies arguably one of the most attractive corners of the city.

Located at the end of the Victorian arcade in Boyces Avenue, between Victoria Square and Clifton Village, it is the closest Bristol has to a smart corner of Hampstead or Notting Hill. It's very London, but unmistakably Clifton.

The restaurant itself only opens in the evening (by day, it's a popular cafe), which adds to its appeal and why it's often fully booked, although the fact there were a few empty tables on a Wednesday evening just goes to show that the credit crunch has even bitten the people of BS8.

At night, it's a lovely room with church candles, fairy lights and white linen on the wooden farmhouse tables. It must rank as one of the nicest and most intimate dining rooms in the city – perfect for special occasions or first dates – although on this occasion I was dining alone.

Hofman and her team major on Modern European food and, like her mentors, uses only seasonal produce and local/organic if she can.

Running alongside the à la carte menu, there is a very good value set menu costing £17.95 for

Guide stamps its approval



Wild sea bass, salsify, fennel and anchovy, and red wine butter sauce



Crème caramel with orange and hazelnut biscotti

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three courses or £14.95 for two, with a choice of three starters and main courses.

I waded into the à la carte, which was relatively short (seven starters and the same number of main courses) and sensibly priced (no

main course more than £17.50, which is really the most Bristol restaurants should be charging at the moment).

There were plenty of dishes I wanted to order – always a good sign – including the pan-fried crevettes with piquillo pepper and sherry vinaigrette; Spanish black pudding with Puy lentils, caramelised apples and sage; and the Cornish hake with mussel, leek and saffron broth.

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I started with Hofman's own take on Stephen Markwick's legendary Provencale fish soup (£7.50), which arrived with separate little dishes of grated cheese and fiery rouille pepper sauce.

The soup was smoother than Markwick's, which has more texture and more fishy bits lurking at the bottom, but it had an excellent depth of flavour and was clearly a soup made with a lot of love.

I followed this with wild sea bass, salsify, fennel and anchovy, and red wine butter sauce (£16.50). The two generous fillets of fish were very fresh and handled with the respect they deserved. It was good to see salsify being used and the glossy red wine sauce was intense and very well made.

To finish, a faultless crème caramel (£5.75) that was pleasingly dark and caramelly on top and comfortingly creamy beneath. It was served with excellent orange and hazelnut biscotti.

Although I later discovered Hofman wasn't in the kitchen when I visited (she was on a rare day off), it didn't show, which is

always a mark of consistency in any restaurant.

With more and more people wanting to stay local when they dine out, Primrose Cafe & Bistro is still a benchmark neighbourhood restaurant and one that just goes from strength to strength.

If you want solid cooking and seasonal food without the frippery, look no further.

MARK TAYLOR

VERDICT

Prices: A la carte starters from £5.50; main courses from £10.50; desserts from £4.95. Set menu £14.95 for two courses or £17.95 for three courses.

Wheelchair access: Yes.

Food: 8/10
Service: 8/10
Atmosphere: 8/10
Value: 8/10
Overall: 8/10