

Herbstreet on the right road

Sunday, December 14, 2008 - By Ross Golden Bannon

Herbstreet Restaurant

Hanover Quay, Dublin 1

Tel 01-6753875

Chef: Siobhan Kennedy

It sometimes happens that you get a whiff of authenticity from a newly-opened restaurant purely from hearing rumours of its menu. Herbstreet Restaurant is just such a spot.

On first sight, however, its cool look sparks a slight worry. A square space has been sliced diagonally by a wooden-panelled wall. The kitchen sits behind the wider part of the diagonal space and the rest is filled with Eames-style spindly chairs (surprisingly comfy). The concrete walls have utilitarian light fixtures lifted by a colouring of tangerine paint.

This sort of uber-styling is often the precursor to quick-buck, pedestrian food, so I paid a lunchtime visit with a foodie friend to see if Herbstreet was actually all style over substance and rumour. A pitcher of tap water immediately appeared on our table. If ever there was a symbol of good service it is this. Neither the wait staff nor the restaurateur make any financial gain from this gesture, but customers are made immediately at ease and also feel no pressure to order bottled water.

Focus on the customer remains at the centre of the menu too, with signposts to indicate the presence of superfoods, nut content, low-glycaemic index foods, and wheat-free and vegetarian options.

To start we shared the ham terrine with fresh herbs piccalilli, salad and rye bread (€10.50). Each element had been carefully sourced so that the piccalilli was fresh tasting without any rasping vinegary aftertaste. The flakes of meat had meltingly good jelly bits and the salad, so often neglected, sang of TLC. Chard and lambs lettuce leaves combined with herb leaves and roasted peppers to deliver a simple but stylish accompaniment.

From a short wine list I went for a glass of the Crozes-Hermitage (€7.50), an excellent all-rounder for the lunch served in an updated Paris goblet without the stem (cooler than it sounds). A bottle of Brahma beer from Brazil was also ordered (€4.50).

For the main course my foodie friend ordered the special of the day: fish pie packed with salmon prawns and mussels, with a flaky top that added a strong contrast of texture and flavour. I think Richard Corrigan does a slightly better job of the fish pie, but we are talking nano-degrees here.

Other main courses included old reliables such as steak sandwich with chips (€14.95); goujons of plaice with home-made tartar sauce (€14.50) and hot corned beef sandwich on rye bread (€9.95).

I settled on the warm Mediterranean salad of lemon and herb-infused couscous topped with warm grilled haloumi cheese with rocket pesto and fruit compote (€12.95). The couscous was bursting with colour and flavour. Flecks of black olive combined with sweet roasted pepper and pings of coriander to create a winner component in a dish that kept getting better, with soft baby figs, sweet-giving apricots and salty cheese. We also ordered a portion of shoestring chips (€3.50), which appeared the way they

are advertised - something of a rare occurrence in other eateries.

For dessert we had the ice cream sandwich made with Tickety Moo ice cream sandwiched between two homemade chocolate chip cookies and served with warm chocolate sauce (€6). The top cookie was still warm, so it slowly bent over the ice cream and gave under the fork, delivering a chewy consistency. The chocolate sauce was liquid mortal sin. I grow weak at the thought of it.

We also ordered the banoffee sundae, which was, essentially, banoffee pie served in a glass topped with jersey ice cream and candied pecan nuts (€6). The ice cream and sweet pecan nuts alone were a great combo, as was the deeper naughtiness of the banoffee pie - although I suspect not everyone will love the proportions when compared to a flat pie.

At a quick glance the seasoned eye will see from the food that this menu is constructed of equal proportions of good business acumen and a love of food.

If you miss the undercurrents in the testimony in the food descriptions above, Herbstreet has pinned its colours to the mast on the menu: "here's what we're into: homemade food, cooked to order, using locally-sourced ingredients where possible. Reducing our carbon footprint, some good tunes and a happy workforce." They also have some very happy customers.

Watching the pennies

Starter: spicy buffalo wings with Cashel blue cheese dip €8.50

Main course: Hot corned beef sandwich €9.95

Dessert: banoffee sundae €6

Wine: Simone Joseph, Vin de Pays d'Oc 2005 €22

Dinner for two: €70.90

Breaking the bank

Starter: baked goat's cheese €11.50

Main course: pan-fried salmon and crab fish cakes €14.95

Dessert: flourless chocolate cake €6

Wine: Domaine des Hauts Chassis Crozes-Hermitage 2006 €32

Tomás Clancy rates the wine list

At only seven wines (four red, three white) and a prosecco, this is the shortest restaurant wine list I have seen. However, the two-star rating reflects this brevity, not the choice or quality of the wines. Prices range from €22 to €32 and each wine is available by the glass. The most intriguing wines are the red Domaine des Hauts Chassis, Crozes-Hermitage 2006 and the white Domaine Yann Chave, Crozes-Hermitage Blanc 2007 (€7.50 a glass).

This maverick Yann Chave wine alone – a searing, citric white wine from a Roussanne and Marsanne blend – signals a creative hand at work. More of this, please.

Rating: **