

## REFUEL



# Designer nosh in Docklands

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**D**o you have to be a masochist to open a restaurant? No, but it helps. This is the conclusion I reached after working in restaurants – and especially after seeing my father lob money into a mediocre one. I watched him pulling out his hair because of the anti-social hours, the exhaustion, clumsy waiters, highly strung chefs, intransigent bankers, whining customers, and asshole reviewers. Wait a minute – I am an asshole reviewer.

It's an unlikely outcome. Yet, it's not so strange to me as the phenomenon of husbands and wives who open restaurants together. Talk about stress testing your marriage.

Yet couples do it all the time. The latest culinary two-hander to hit town is called Herbststreet. It's in the concrete heart of the Docklands, where Mrs Herbststreet does the cooking, while her other half works the floor. I always like to see a lady wearing

trousers – especially if they're a good fit. In this case, they are, which isn't to say I was immediately attracted to Herbststreet.

Au contraire. If I wasn't so hungry, I would have fled the moment I clapped eyes on the futuristic decor. Angular walls, industrial grey paint and orange spotlights... it was like eating breakfast in a Kraftwerk video. The steel lattice chairs pulled a ladder in my new Wolfords – radically boosting the chance of an unfavourable review.

Aesthetic differences aside, it was an unexpected pleasure to discover the budget wasn't blown on decor. The kitchen at Herbststreet is putting out some top-notch grub.

It's a populist menu: expect ubiquity not invention. Fishcakes here, moules there. Chicken Caesar for her, gourmet burger for him. Breakfast is big – pancakes with a choice of maple syrup, bacon, sausage, fruit or crème fraiche. At lunchtime, think ham hock terrine with piccalilli and crusty bread, or a bap stuffed with corned beef, melted cheddar, gherkins and mustard.

## LUNCHBOX

### STEPS OF ROME

1 CHATHAM STREET,  
DUBLIN 2

**The Cost:** €6.80 for slice of pepperoni pizza and slice of ham and artichoke heart pizza.

**The Look:** Italian from top to toe, this popular

pizza pitstop may be small and always crammed, but it's brimming with life and the perfect place to escape the shopping hades around the corner.

**The Goods:** Six large rectangular trays of pizza with a diverse range of toppings, at least two of which are vegetarian, and the lively Italian staff cut generous oblong slices. The fact that lots of the customers are also Italian is all the endorsement it needs.

**The Bad:** The pizza base is more like focaccia rather than traditional crispy thin base, which may not be to everyone's taste.

**HERBSTREET**  
HANOVER QUAY  
GRAND CANAL DOCK  
DUBLIN 2  
TEL: 01 6753875



**TYPICAL DISH:** Burger  
**RECOMMENDED:** Pancakes  
**THE DAMAGE:** €40 for three mains, one juice and two coffees  
**ON THE STEREO:** Rufus Wainwright  
**AT THE TABLE:** Modern families  
**WHAT TO WEAR:** Jigsaw  
**DO SAY:** Vorsprung Zur Technik  
**DON'T SAY:** Pull up a chair

Herbststreet tries hard to give people what they want at a fair price, which makes economic sense in these times. Yet in an extraordinary display of financial masochism, they don't open in the evening. So we went for brunch at the weekend.

The "full breakfast" (€11.50) was a substantial arrangement of soft buttery scrambled eggs, quality "proud to be Irish" back rashers, a chunky potato hash cut with corned beef, fried mushrooms, a grilled ripe tomato, and plenty of toast.

Piggery is a risk at Herbststreet. Our waiter managed not to appear judgmental when I ordered a short stack of pancakes for seconds. What the hell, my girlish figure has long since disappeared from the rear view mirror, and anyway they were worth it. Sweet, golden and so fluffy and light, you'd hardly notice eating them until every last speck of sugar dust was gone from the plate. The finest pancakes I've had for brunch in Ireland – by a long shot.

The Herbststreet burger, topped with a fried egg, bacon and pickles, was a colossus. The Gentleman Caller's gaping jaws could scarcely accommodate its girth. It's delicious, he slurped. It wasn't to my taste. All the flavour had been grilled out of the meat. Served with a mound of skinny chips the burger cost €13.50. Apart from €2.95 squandered on an unpleasantly astringent "detox" drink containing grapefruit and lime juice, our bill seemed very reasonable at €40, which included two strong, but well-rounded coffees.

Presumably Herbststreet caters for nearby businesses during the week, but at the weekend the crowd is a peculiar mix of young families and well-preserved gay couples. Once I got beyond hating the decor, it seemed to me an improbably decent restaurant, in an unpopular location, with limited opening hours.

That's a lot of masochism. Restaurants don't need to be good to survive a recession, but they do need to be busy. This one *is* good – if you're willing to take a detour.

## BARFLY



### DICE BAR

QUEEN STREET  
DUBLIN 7  
01 8748050

**T**hough there's something forced about Smithfield's Christmas jollity – how forlorn that newly installed ferris wheel looks against the backdrop of lego-brick apartments and grey terraces – it's nevertheless encouraging to visit a part of the capital where 'inner-city regeneration' means more than giving the local playground a paint job.

Indeed, this gritty stretch behind the Four Courts has, in recent years, become something of a scenester hotbed. Ground zero for local hipsters is Dice Bar, a Lower East Side style lounge that attracts the young, beautiful and edgy. Posters proclaiming the imminent visit of buzzy indie acts plaster the walls, while on weekends DJs spin the latest tastefully obscure music that the rest of us will catch up on sometime in early 2010.

Curiously, patrons seem to prefer standing – on the evening of our visit, getting from one end of the bar to the other was a bit of an ordeal, so densely were the punters congregated. But the leather banquettes on either side were prominently unoccupied. Maybe standing up while you chug an imported lager is the new black. Settling into the corner with our pint, we reflected that we were by some distance the naughtiest people in the room.

**IN THE GLASS:** Pint of stout €4.60, pint of lager €4.80

**AT THE BAR:** People who are cooler and younger than you are.

**ON THE STEREO:** Cure, Pixies, Smiths

**AND?** Check out the bar unit – imported several years ago from a beach hotel in Miami.

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