

RAW DEAL

You can forgive a wholefood restaurant many things, says
ZOE WILLIAMS, but not 'vegan cheese' or 'hemp praline'

I'm of the mind that vegans need all the help they can get, in making their food taste of anything, and the last thing you should pledge upon opening a vegan restaurant is that it will all be raw. My brother, A, believes contrariwise that they need as many nutrients as possible, and raw is exactly the way they should eat. C, a geologist and also my beloved, is still fuming about the menu's description of Himalayan salt: 'an ancient crystal salt derived from the crystallised primal sea. With over 800 trace minerals this salt is the cleanest, purest in the planet.' 'All salt is ancient!' he rages. 'All sea salt comes from the sea! All salt has trace minerals in it!' I was dreading what was going to happen when they actually fed him.

It always makes my heart sink when they put things like nuts and olives on the menu as a starter – sure, times are lean, but nobody should have to pretend cashew nuts (£4, with olives) are a starter, whichever way you spice them. Anyway, they were OK – tasted like nuts. There was rather a lot of that in store. A had the beetroot ravioli, with a cashew herb ricotta, early asparagus salad, balsamic figs and pumpkin-seed oil (£6.50). Let me talk you through this cashew ricotta; it will save me having to tell you about the 'cheese' course, idiosyncratically placed between starter and main, which we approached with a totally egregious gusto. They get nuts, right – cashews, almonds, macadamias, sometimes a mixture – then smash them into a paste (are you familiar with peanut butter? That is the principle) and heavily salt them with Himalayan crystal. This leaves you with a thick, granular substance that definitely doesn't taste of cheese, no longer really tastes of nuts, is very salty and sometimes slightly herby. A favourite motto of A's girlfriend's dad is 'You can't make cold tea'. You could wait your whole life to usefully deploy a phrase like that, and then a Shoreditch vegan restaurant opens up and everyone's using it all over the place. You can't make vegan cheese; however thinly you slice it, you can't make raw beetroot taste cooked. Why are you even trying?

C had the spring dumplings (£6), which had been cooked, or rather 'heated above 48 degrees'; he has an uncanny ability to find the tastiest thing on a joyless menu, possibly because his

brain has an early-warning-alert on the word 'dumpling'. The filling was spinach, fried onion, date and water chestnut, and it all worked very well, taste-wise and texturally, the obligatory vegetal crunch feeling a bit more satisfying in dumpling form. He found it heavy on the salt, as indeed was everything else. That's not what I mind most about this food, but it would be a bummer to be a vegan all your life and then get heart disease anyway.

C and A both had the ravioli with puttanesca sauce (£8.50), though no anchovies in the sauce, obviously, so I don't know why they called it that, or what they replaced them with, apart from, you know, more salt. I had the mixed wild-mushroom croquette with truffle alfredo, baby spring vegetables and rosemary (£11). A said, 'This is probably some of the most natural food you will ever taste,' and I'm afraid I couldn't agree less. The mushrooms were tasty and everything, but the attempt to make a centrepiece out of them, as if they were a great big steak, involved too much fuss. Regardless, the point is not whether they should have added meat, but rather whether this is as good as vegan food can get. I don't think it is. It could have been a deal less affected – more tapas-style small plates and less trying to ape a very traditional format without any of the necessary ingredients.

I have run out of time to tell you about puds; in a nutshell, try to avoid them. The hemp praline is particularly disgusting. ●

Saf

152-154 Curtain Road, London EC2
(020 7613 0007)

Three courses: £20.75 Stella rating: 5/10





MORE VEGAN JOINTS

Earth Café 16-20 Turner Street, Manchester (01618 341996) An ethical café and juice bar beneath the Manchester Buddhist Centre. Try gado gado, a traditional Indonesian dish of crispy steamed vegetables and bean sprouts with a spicy peanut sauce (£2.85)

Rootmaster The Old Truman Brewery, Hanbury Street, London E1 (07912 389314) Meals on wheels – in an old (stationary!) London bus, which seats 30 on the upper deck. They serve broccoli tartlet with leek and red-onion mash in a savoy-cabbage basket with tzatziki (£12)

Food for Friends 17-18 Prince Albert Street, Brighton (01273 202310) This veggie-vegan stalwart has a prime position in the historic Lanes. Watch the crowds through full-length windows, while enjoying sweet-potato gratin, roasted Mediterranean vegetables, red-pepper coulis and rocket (£11.45)