

Eating out around Piccadilly

30 Jul 2005 by JR

'Impressionism Abroad', the new exhibition at London's Royal Academy, will give as much pleasure to the thousands who see it before it ends on 11 sep as it will to the owners and shareholders of Richoux, Pret a Manger, Patisserie Valerie and The Wolseley, all of which stand opposite the RA. They will be most grateful for the extra hungry, thirsty customers this exhibition will deliver.

While this area already boasts a number of interesting cafes and restaurants – Caffe Nero, Green's, Le Caprice and Al Duca are also only a stone's throw away - there are two newcomers well worth a visit as well as a third, a little further away, which will have a strong appeal for anyone planning to visit Piccadilly.

Automat in Dover Street is not the kind of place where the food is the overriding draw but its style, design and service are such that it will only ever upset anyone in a really dour frame of mind. It is a swanky version of one of those comforting American diners that every visitor to the US enjoys while they are over there and wishes they could enjoy back home. Now Carlos Almada, a New York- based, architect and restaurateur has made that possible.

He has done so by taking a deep, narrow building and constructing three different sections within it: an informal section at the front overlooking the street; more comfortable booth seating in the middle guaranteed to appeal to the numerous merchant bankers working nearby; and a section of tables under a glass roof at the rear past the open and extremely cramped kitchen.

But other than the fact that this might restrict the girth of anyone who would want to cook there, the size of the kitchen had no deleterious effect on our enjoyable meal. A hefty starter of macaroni and cheese; a well spiced crab cake with guacamole; a po'boy sandwich stuffed with soft shell crab; and a classically presented Gulf shrimp salad were all as good as they would have been in New York (if more expensive - but this is London...). The menu also offers predictable American fare – hamburger and fries, New York strip steak with more fries, and filling desserts – which would make Automat a strong inducement for anyone planning to visit the RA with any slightly less than enthusiastic children.

Just a street away in Albemarle Street chef/ proprietor Maurizio Vilona has taken a building of very similar proportions, albeit this time with the kitchen in the basement, to create a completely different type of restaurant that provides a new home for his **Giardinetto** restaurant which won such a faithful following at its former site in Charlotte Street.

In style, design and delivery Giardinetto is unequivocally Italian and happily unlike any other Italian restaurant in London in both its good and less good aspects. Here is a restaurant where the focus is predominantly on eating and drinking well and being courteously looked after.

A lunch and subsequent dinner revealed that Vilona, who hails from Liguria where fish is the speciality, has found his feet very quickly. On a sunny day by the window a cool fruit and vegetable soup with a virgin olive oil sorbet and a fritto misto di pesce incorporating deep fried cod, monkfish, salmon, prawns and squid were so good that I felt as though I were by the sea, while a dinner on a much colder day involved his soothing signature dish of minestrone with pesto, two refreshing carpaccios of monkfish with a citrus salad and octopus with a vegetable julienne, a roast chicken fed on figs to give it a much richer and more pungent flavour, and rabbit with sage, pine nuts and tiny Taggiasche olives. The pleasure of eating such intriguing food is enhanced by an excellent selection of Italian cheeses, elegantly served on a square plate with three fruit accompaniments down the side and a really stunning Italian wine list which sommelier Christian Bucci has collated and augmented with the design features Italians deliver with such aplomb, first class glassware and decanters.

But any wholehearted recommendation for what Vilona and his team deliver on the plate and in the glass has to be tempered by concern over its design. Although the finishes are expensive, most notably the plush leather chairs, the front part of the restaurant is nevertheless rather neutral and cold, an attribute accentuated whenever the restaurant's glass sliding doors, presumably incorporated to allow easy wheelchair chair access, open and close. This particular combination of distinctive food and a rather cramped interior will appeal more to those in parties of three or four than just a deux.

Slightly further away, just round the corner from Oxford Circus and Carnaby Street – so particularly useful for anyone guiding a group of teenagers to the RA – is the very exciting **Ping Pong**, whose layout, menu and price list will appeal to everyone keen on dim sum, even those eating on their own.

Ping Pong is the brainchild of Kurt Zdesar, former GM of Nobu Europe, who has spotted the growing appeal of dim sum, Chinese little parcels of deliciousness as the restaurant's front window boasts, and turned this obviously expensive location into a viable economic model with inexpensive menu prices by utilising a commercial unit in south London to assemble the 5,000 pieces of dim sum every morning. These are then delivered, steamed, fried or baked and then put into their traditional wicker baskets in open kitchens on the restaurant's two floors in front of which are semi-circular counters where one can sit and eat. The freshness of Ping Pong's dim sum is accentuated by a clever design and a great sense of fun.

Automat, 33 Dover Street, London W1S 4NF 020-7499 3033 £20 per head.

Giardinetto, 39/40 Albemarle Street London W1S 020-7493 7091 £30-35 per head.

Ping Pong 45 Great Marlborough Street London W1F 7JL 020-7851 6969 £10-15 per head.