Ravintola Lasipalatsi in Helsinki

10 Jun 2012 by Edward Parshotam

See our guide to all readers' restaurant reviews.

St Ambrose's advice to St Augustine of Hippo on whether to adopt local liturgical customs has stood the test of time. 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do', people still remark when encouraging others to embrace the local culture, wherever they may be. Perhaps the longevity of the phrase reflects its soundness. After all, there seems little point in leaving the country only to set about replicating every aspect of home.

It's for this reason that I entered Ravintola Lasipalatsi (the Glass Palace restaurant) with a 'when in Helsinki' attitude, ready to weigh up whether to opt for reindeer or perch. It wasn't to be a quick decision because the menu-cum-novel presents diners with the option of ordering from either the Helsinki, classic, vegetarian or à la carte menu, which is broken down into meat, fish and vegetarian dishes, not to mention the dedicated asparagus tasting menu, which is seasonally on offer from mid April to the end of May.

My companion had settled on sauteed reindeer with mashed potatoes and crushed lingonberries before I eventually opted for a dish of lamb vorschmack. Such is my love of lamb that I'm likely to order it even when it precedes a word, such as vorschmack, that I'm unfamiliar with. Despite this, I was still grateful for the fact that, in the smartphone age, ordering food abroad is unlikely to ever be a complete leap into the unknown. Having been informed by trusty Wikipedia that vorschmack is a 'salty meat dish prepared mainly out of minced meat, anchovies or herring and onions', I threw caution to the wind and placed my order.

I was glad I did so once the dish (pictured) was brought out and the flavour combinations, which the Wikipedia description left me slightly unsure of, married beautifully on the plate. The minced lamb was served with pickled gherkin, beetroot and soured cream. This resulted in each mouthful crying out for a taste of one of the other flavour components, creating a perfect circle that I could have happily continued until it became unhealthy. In fact, the reason I know I could have done this is because that is exactly what I did.

It was likewise with the reindeer dish, the richness of the meat's being offset by the sharpness of the lingonberries and the creaminess of the mashed potato. Granted, this wasn't the sort of complex cuisine revered by Michelin inspectors, either in technique or presentation. Instead, this was hearty, filling comfort food that could guard against the coldest Finnish winter, excite the palate and commend the wisdom of Saint Ambrose.

Ravintola Lasipalatsi, Mannerheimintie 22-24, 00100 Helsinki