

## Restaurant review

# Becoming an artist



### Doug's dinners

#### L'Artist

6, Tigne Street, Sliema

Tel: 2720 0870

Food	8/10
Service	7/10
Ambience	6/10
Value	6/10

**Overall** 7/10

In London it is possible to dine out every night of the year at a different restaurant and still not go to the same place twice. For 15 years. And, if you factor in new restaurants that open, that figure can be stretched to 20.

That is the sort of eating out that only professionals can cope with. Those with specially reinforced, kevlar-lined livers and gigantic expense accounts.

In Malta, by the very nature of our size, dining options are nothing like as vast. There are plenty to choose from, but nothing even vaguely close to the English capital.

So, like a teenager at a Michael Jackson concert, I tend to get a little excited at the prospect of dining somewhere untried and untested.

Which is why, when my wife told me a new place was opening around the corner from her office, I wasted no time in booking myself in for what I imagine was L'Artist's first -possibly second - Friday night of business.

With my wife otherwise occupied, I team up with an American relative of hers who happened to be in Malta on one of his frequent visits. Armed with a couple of healthy appetites and the type of directions only a woman can provide, we drove to Sliema.

Despite the fact that shops and businesses are closed, parking is still a nightmare and it takes three laps to find a spot suitably close. Only later do I remember the multi-storey car park in one of those slap-your-own-forehead moments.

L'Artist is located on Tigne Street, replacing the restaurant that used to be La Vigna. From the outside it looks quaint, inviting and fresh in the way only newly opened restaurants can.

As we walk in, we are greeted and guided to a table by an enthusiastic man who seems extremely happy to see us. I hate forced welcomes just as much as I hate being told to have a nice day by people who couldn't care if I got run over later that afternoon. But this man's welcome is both genuine and warm.

As the menus arrive we order a couple of drinks to get the evening rolling. A vodka for me and a Becks for my companion. It would



have been a Heineken, but they didn't have any.

The menu itself is not bursting with options but there is sufficient variety to make selection entertaining. Having mentally picked mine, I let my eyes wander. There are three or four other tables occupied in what is really quite a tiny dining area. But, to my mind, that's a plus. I am not a fan of large, echoing dining rooms that make you feel like you are eating in an airport lounge.

In the corner, stairs lead up to what we later discover is a private dining area, although I am sure, on busy nights, they will throw it open to all comers. Be daft not to really.

The waiter/host comes over to take our order. He really does have a lot of energy this man - like a walking advert for Red Bull. But I much prefer the bouncy, energetic approach as opposed to the lethargic, robotic and disinterested waiters you find in some places.

I go for the spicy beef salad as a starter while my guest - let's call him Leo because, well, that's his name actually, and there is no need to protect the innocent when the innocent come from Massachusetts - goes for the platter of cheeses and salamis.

For mains, Leo goes with the fresh fillet which he asks for medium to well. I decide to go fishy and opt for the sea bass and leave its preparation entirely in the hands of the chef.

A basket of gorgeous, slightly salted and extremely fresh bread makes its way to the table and we hungrily pounce. As Leo is not a big wine fan, we decline the list.

It's not that I have a problem with the idea of demolishing an entire bottle on my own. Been done before and will no doubt be

done again. But unless someone else at least takes a glass, the guilt outweighs the joy.

What about a half bottle, I hear you cry. Well, obviously that is a possibility. But I tend to associate those with elderly couples, solo diners and language students. I just can't bring myself to do it. No, I will stick with the vodka and sparkling water and Leo is more than happy with beer.

Moments later the starters arrive. Well, actually, I should say 'a' starter arrives. Leo's platter touches down but there has been a breakdown in communication between our lively host and the kitchen. This means they were under the impression the platter

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was for the two of us to share, so my beef salad has not even made it out of the starting blocks."

An honest and possibly understandable mistake and no big deal really. But, looking back on it, at what point were they expecting to serve my starter? As a takeaway? Bit strange that.

However, the place is new so you can expect some teething problems and, in the spirit of acceptance, myself and my guest decide we will share after all.

The platter itself is superbly presented. And I mean superbly. The various cheeses come with a

little fruit, bits of salad, breadsticks and a small tumbler of port that nestles in the middle of the plate.

It looks the business and the combination of tastes is every bit as good as the presentation. It would have probably been enough for two to share as a starter even though I don't believe it was designed as a two-person dish, the single glass of port being a bit of a giveaway.

Midway through its consumption the chef comes out to apologise for the beef salad confusion. Nice that he knows what is happening front of house and equally refreshing that he cared enough to make the personal appearance.

We shrug it off and tell him to just bring the salad along whenever it is ready. No doubt we will give it a good seeing to at whatever stage it arrives.

With the platter finished we head outside for a smoke. Or at least I do. Leo just comes along to keep me company and to regale me with more of his 'hunting' tales from the States, including one about a rather stubborn wild boar which, on photographic evidence, was the size of a young mammoth.

Back at the table we have only been re-seated for a few minutes when there is a sudden flurry of activity and both main courses come out. Along with my previously 'missing in action' starter. As I said, teething problems.

However, if there is one thing guaranteed to make up for a few logistical errors, it is good food. And this is certainly that. Very good food.

My fish has been delicately cooked with just a hint of added flavour. But being ultra fresh, it doesn't really need too much tin-

tering with. My beef salad, which is sitting between the two of us being shared, is also top class. Spicy enough to leave your lips tingling but not so overpowering that you need to reach for the nearest vase of flowers.

I have to say I have never combined fish and spicy beef before. And certainly not in a starter and main course at the same time manner. But, strangely, it is working out rather nicely.

Leo, meanwhile, is doing some serious damage to his fillet. And thoroughly enjoying it in the process. "I've been coming to Malta for more than 20 years and this is the best piece of meat I have had here," he says between mouthfuls. High praise indeed from a man who generally shoots his own meat back home.

The main courses are accompanied by nicely prepared vegetables and potatoes although, thanks to the three dishes arriving at once, they don't get much usage.

Halfway way through the main course, the chef comes over again to ask if everything is OK and to apologise once more for the strange delivery order of the food. He seems, like the man running front of house, to be extremely enthusiastic about his food and his restaurant. He has a positive vibe that rubs off on you instantly.

It's like they are all doing what they do for the love of cooking and not to make money. I am sure that isn't the case, but giving your guests that impression makes the whole dining experience a little more memorable.

Although we had planned to go for desserts, the sheer size of our three-plate main course had knocked the wind out of our eating sails. We could have made space but it would only have been in an effort to give a new definition to the word gluttony.

Instead we sit back to bask in our fullness, me personally doing everything in my power to resist taking the old belt down a notch and loosening a button. So we ask for the bill and, when it arrives, it is pretty much what I expected, coming in just shy of €70. From my recent experiences, about average for a good meal for two in Malta, although a bottle of wine and dessert would have pushed it into the pricey region.

Essentially, L'Artist requires a little refining if it is to become truly successful. It needs polishing in terms of decor, which is a tiny bit on the bland side with blank white walls that cry out for some art. The accuracy of the service - although not the manner - needs brushing up too. We easily dismissed the starter mix up but there are less forgiving people out there who wouldn't. People who would revel in it, actually.

However, the food itself was excellent. All four erratically served courses were delicious, good enough to make you want to start the whole meal over if only you could find the space.

As it stands right now, L'Artist is a rough diamond. But it has all the right ingredients to become one of the best restaurants that has opened in Malta for a while.

The management has the makings of a real gem on their hands. I hope they get the polishing right. [dougsdinners@timesofmalta.com](mailto:dougsdinners@timesofmalta.com)