

the taste of sunshine

NESTLED in the heart of Cardiff's student area, you could be forgiven for thinking that Mina, with its cheerful cocktail board and reasonable prices, will be full of large groups of drunken youngsters too lazy to cook.

But far from it. On this visit the restaurant's customers are predominately middle-aged couples, and a couple of families, including one large group celebrating a birthday.

Such is the charm of this intimate restaurant that my dining partner and I have become firm regulars here, and for some time have been on a personal mission to introduce all our friends to Mina.

And it seems we're not the only regulars here tonight, with more than one group of diners welcomed like old friends – faithful customers being the best recommendation there is.

The customer service is excellent at all times, with the staff friendly, attentive and polite.

For example, when the birthday party have finished eating, the music is turned off and a cha-cha version of Happy Birthday played to the woman celebrating, after which the whole restaurant, including the staff, bursts into spontaneous applause.

It's little touches like this that make you feel important, like the staff care that you have a good time, rather than just watch how much you spend.

The decor here is captivating – full of interesting artefacts such as exotic rugs and cushion covers pinned to the walls, and rustic earthenware pots dotted here and there, making the dining experience a very pleasant one.

Of course, good staff and a nice set-up would be nothing if the quality of food wasn't there to match – and fortunately Mina can't be faulted on this front.

The restaurant serves Lebanese and Mediterranean food, its dishes uncomplicated and subtly flavoured with delicate spices.

The starters are such a refreshing change from the typical caprese salad, garlic mushrooms and prawns you find at most eateries.

Instead, we find hummus served with an Eastern style flatbread, falafel, battata harra (cubes of baby potatoes cooked with coriander, chilli, garlic and spices) and – my personal favourite – moutabal (charcoal-grilled aubergine blended with garlic, tahini – pure sesame oil – and lemon juice) served with olive oil.

Rather like hummus in its consistency, this is a light and refreshing dish that had my dining partner reaching over the table and offering to "review" it for me several times.

If you're in a group of three or more you can opt for a mezza platter, which combines several such starters in generous portions and is the perfect solution if you're struggling to decide on what to order. The wait between first and main courses was spot on; long enough that we had digested our starter but not too long that we had become too hungry.

My companion opted for Shish Tawk, generous cubes of chicken fillet marinated in garlic, lemon juice, olive oil and char-grilled, served with salad and grilled tomatoes, onions and green

and red peppers.

Being a vegetarian, I opted for the Veggie Club, grilled aubergine, tomatoes, courgette, onions, and garlic topped with cheese and served with salad, a beautiful blend of flavours.

But I also recommend the vegetarian cous cous, served with vegetable and spices in an eastern-looking clay pot, and the dolma, rolled vine leaves stuffed with rice, tomatoes, fresh parsley and spices and served with salad and a yoghurt-mint sauce.

It's so refreshing to find dishes that have been created with as much attention and imagination as the meat dishes.

The presentation is thoughtful and unusual and I'm thankful to see there's no token vegetarian lasagne in sight.

Both dishes were accompanied by delicately flavoured rice.

Interestingly, we weren't the only customers to comment that the rice



LASTING IMPRESSIONS

CUISINE A good selection of Lebanese and Mediterranean style food, although the menu does include pasta and steak

DRINKS Plenty of wines and beers to choose from, as well as an extensive cocktail menu and Lebanese coffees and teas

SERVICE Friendly, attentive staff will get your food to you in good time

VALUE With starters from £3.50 and mains from £7.50, it's excellent value.

PARKING Plenty of free parking off and around Crwys Road. Just make sure to avoid residents only spaces

ACCESS Everything is on one level, but as it's a narrow venue it can get quite busy, meaning wheelchair users and prams would find it difficult to move around

COST Two three-course meals plus a couple of drinks came to £32.55.

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WHERE Crwys Road, Cathays, Cardiff, CF24 4ND. They also have a website which is www.cafemina.co.uk

MARKS OUT OF 10 8/10

served was different on this visit to the spicy blend the restaurant used to serve.

We preferred the original, but that's not to say the new recipe isn't tasty too. From the dessert menu, the vanilla and toffee, pecan-nut, honey-pot ice cream is a must-have.

Served in an earthenware pot, this is a delicious concoction of ice-cream, that is just the right size to not make you feel sinful but big enough to satisfy those sweet cravings.

In terms of drinks, opting for the house wines is a good idea (or indeed a jug of water) as these are served in beautiful earthenware jugs.

Alternatively, Mina stocks a number of Lebanese and Moroccan beers – or as already mentioned, an extensive selection of cocktails.

■ **Cathryn Scott** was doing the tasting

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