

▶ EATING OUT: David Wakefield checks out an old favourite to see how it's coping in these credit crunch times

Pictures: STEVÉ ADAMS/ ANTONY KELLY



Last but certainly not least

These credit crunch times seem to be a mass of contradictions. A morning in the city indicated that people are not cutting back on their shopping – particularly where food is concerned. Yet it is sad to stroll around the Norwich restaurant hinterland and see several places we have been used to visiting over the years now lying sad and dark of a Saturday evening.

We passed two such spots in the Tombland area recently so clearly these are difficult times for restaurants. Maybe people are spending their money on eating at home instead?

All of this means that those which are surviving are having to be on their toes in terms of service and value for money – twin virtues that we have never found wanting at one of our particular favourite city venues, The Last Wine Bar and Restaurant, where the buzzy and busy bar is a favourite spot for a refreshing glass.

Mind you, this evening hadn't begun too promisingly. My wife and I are not early eaters, and enjoy a leisurely drink before our meal. Arriving well before our booking time to do just that we were a little taken aback to be ushered to our table a few moments later.

Normally this would not be too much of a blow, but in this instance the spectre of the Eurovision Song Contest – which we knew our daughter, an avid fan, would be watching so we wouldn't be able to avoid it – hung heavily over the success of our evening should we arrive home too early.

My spirits were not lifted when, after being shown to our cosy booth in the Last's rabbit warren of a basement, we were told that there was a hen party in the next room – "so it might be a bit noisy".

But as low points go this wasn't so bad.

Moments later, a waitress told us that the kitchen operation had temporarily fallen behind. Did we mind waiting to place our order? No we didn't. And would we accept some olives, bread and olive oil as culinary compensation? You bet!

Thus fortified by our excellent focaccia, and encouraged by the fact that the hen party noise was confined to the occasional shriek of laughter, we studied the menu at a more leisurely pace.

Dory Masri, head chef at The Last for a decade, is well versed in mixing his Middle Eastern influences with a contemporary style, and the food there is always interesting in its concept. For example, Tiger prawns are wrapped in Kateifi pastry, and sirloin steak is served

NEED TO KNOW



Where is it?

The Last Wine Bar and Restaurant is at 76 St George's Street, Norwich, on the site of a former shoe factory. The basement area retains many of its original features, whereas the upstairs restaurant and the popular bar/restaurant have more of a contemporary feel.

Do I need to book?

Yes, as it is very popular and it's advisable to book early if you want a particular table, or to eat in the very popular bar area. Call 01603 626626 or book by e-mail by visiting the website at www.lastwinebar.co.uk

Suitable for children?

In a word, no, so far as little ones are concerned; but teens might enjoy it.

What about disabled customers?

There are steps into the bar area, and the basement obviously presents difficulties. But the street level restaurant is all on one level.

Parking?

Not good, as it's mostly permit parking in the immediate area. But there are nearby car parks at the Monastery and St Andrew's for £1.60 in the evenings.

with a spring onion tabouleh.

This fusion cooking works for me, and because of this I chose one of the "veggie" starters, chickpeas with yoghurt tahini, toasted pine nuts and toasted flat bread (£5.50), while my wife looked no further than the char-grilled asparagus wrapped in Parma ham with melted Fontina, cornichons, Manzanilla and honey dressing (£5.95).

I've always loved the texture of chickpeas since my first venture into Greek cooking many years ago, and this was a delicious combination with the tiny flatbreads – almost like potato crisps in their texture – adding a crowning touch. My wife's asparagus was nice and fresh and the delicate taste was lifted by its more punchy accompaniments.

Last time we ate at The Last I had the seabass, which was particularly memorable; but was determined to try something different this time. Anyway I knew my wife would choose it – and she did. It came poached with salmon mousse, Charmoula spring vegetables, green olives and preserved lemon (£14.25) and certainly lived up to expectations.

So did my loin of lamb, stuffed with pine nuts and apricot, and served with flageolet beans, aubergine and fennel compote (£14.45). I love lamb in all its forms, and the slightly fatty taste of the loin was complemented by the sweetness of the apricots and was strong enough to combat the fennel, too.

To accompany our mains we had a dish of roquette leaves with sun-dried tomatoes, croutons and Parmesan (£2.50).

While my wife finished off the last of our very nice Trefili Pinot Grigio (£15.95) I enjoyed a generous cafetiere of coffee (a superb value £1.30) to round off an excellent meal. Any restaurant that is not penny-pinching where coffee is concerned will get my vote. I get fed up with paying up to £3 for a small cup, with refills only grudgingly given when requested. So top marks to The Last not only for that but for its polite and extremely helpful staff.

Our hen party played the game by being surprisingly restrained, and, joy of joys, we managed to miss the denouement of Eurovision, too. Even the realisation that our great nation had been humbled by the musical might of Azerbaijan didn't spoil our evening.

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