

Time to tea off in oriental style

BIANCA COLEMAN
creative juice



SO THERE we were, having accidentally stumbled into a place that appeared not only to be vegetarian, but possibly vegan (I don't know much about those things), agreeing that it definitely wouldn't go down well with some of the big, beefy, meat-loving men we know.

O'Ways has a very Zen feel to it. It's light and airy, with clear chairs and clear glass teapots complementing each other. My friend, who has an artist's eye, appreciated the design elements and how much thought had gone into them, from the floor to the ceiling.

The café is owned by Lisa Tsai, a piano teacher who left Bishops Preparatory to launch O'Ways. She hasn't left music behind though; there is a baby grand at the back of the room. Tsai is married to master tea merchant Mingwei Tsai of Nigiro, who leads tea ceremonies and tastings. Marion Kumpf, former sous chef at the award-winning Aubergine restaurant, created the menu to complement the range of more than 60 loose-leaf teas.

It's all very well to have so many teas on offer but it can be a little overwhelming. They have green tea,

O'WAYS TEA CAFE

Where: Shop 2, Heritage House, 20 Dreyer Street, Claremont.

Tel: 021 671 2850

When: Monday-Friday, 7.30am-5pm; Saturday: 9am-2pm

Licence: No

Smoking: No

white tea, black tea, red tea, Chinese artistic show tea, Oolong tea, scented and flavoured teas, fruit infusions, herbal infusions and more, served hot or cold. Samples of each are in little clear glass vases in a display cabinet and our very knowledgeable waitress made some suggestions and allowed us to nose the leaves. We settled on a Chai infusion but if you don't know what you like or want I get the feeling you're going to miss out on quite a bit.

The tea is a ceremony in itself. It is served in a glass pot, set atop a stand with a tealight candle, with the leaves in an infuser. The clear cups are half-filled with hot water, and there is an egg timer involved. It's all very proper and civilised, and no milk or sugar is offered.

The menu is divided into four sections: Let's Break-Fast, Let's Lunch, Let's Go East and Let's Go Sweet. Under the circumstances, it



COMPLEMENTARY: Much thought has gone into the interior of O'Ways.

seemed appropriate to have the dim sum platter for two (R158) since "Dim sum is a Cantonese term for a type of Chinese dish that involves small individual portions of food, usually served in a small steamer basket or on a small plate. Going for dim sum is usually known in Cantonese as going to 'drink tea'." See wonderful Wikipedia for more on the history of dim sum and tea tasting.

According to our waitress, the platter would contain two of everything from the Let's Go East section of the menu, but that turned out not to be true. We did get an attractive plate with sticky rice with toasted nuts and plum sauce, mantou buns, and the braised har gau - dumplings filled with oriental mushrooms and still the one thing I like best at O'Ways, having had them previously at the launch.

In a separate bowl we had the warm vermicelli salad with roasted peanuts and crunchy vegetables. The deep-fried quail tea egg on the

menu was absent but we did love the tiny, sweet bright-green peas in there, which were also dotted on the *amuse bouche* of a chilled cucumber soup with a piece of tofu. A bamboo steamer of bread was served at the same time as the *amuse*, and before that, a steamer with two hot cloths to clean your hands.

Also on the platter, surrounding salads of grated carrots, cucumber and sprouts, were two more big pieces of tofu (silky but by nature tasteless), one little dumpling with veg inside, and two kinds of savoury cakes. Things on the menu but not served to us are a crispy rice-paper fortune parcel "encouraged by chilled avocado soup" and tom yum broth "enhanced with tofu marbles, goji berries and enoki mushrooms".

It's perhaps a pity that our lifestyles and palates are so saturated with salt, sugar and other flavourants because even with the addition of teriyaki and chilli sauces we both found all the food

incredibly bland, and some of it was quite stodgy (yes mantou buns, I am talking to you). Interesting. But bland.

Lunch options include honey and mustard-flavoured tofu slices in ciabatta roll with apple and celery salad, smoked mozzarella tartare (what?) with roasted barley and rucola dressing, a "goats-cheese delight" with gluten-free melba toast and sun-dried tomato and basil vinaigrette, and what I wish I'd had, linguine with spicy oven-roasted aubergines and cherry tomatoes.

The bill came to R183 and was presented, along with two delicious little cookies with blueberries, in a canister with some dry rice. The waitress shook it before giving to us, and explained that Lisa believes it's a lucky charm. I don't know if it's lucky for her or for us but it's a nice sentiment. The R25 pot of tea was enough for two cups each.

● All Good Weekend reviews are unannounced and paid for in full.