

## The ViewLondon Review



Review by **Michelle Court** 05/06/2008

**One of Germany's biggest restaurant chains has finally landed in London, promising fresh food, fast.**

### The Venue

Spread over two levels, Vapiano's London location is right off the Oxford Circus end of Oxford Street, making it ideal for shoppers and office workers. Already a huge success in Germany and the United States, with other franchises across the world, Vapiano's concept is simple. Pick up a menu, pick up a card, pick up a tray and order your food. At each food and drink station there's a little machine you hold your card up to and it records the price. Get as much - or as little - as you want, and when you're done bring the card up to the cash registers and pay. Easy, right?

The general decor is a mix of pale colours and bright red, relaxing and eye-catching at the same time. At the front of the restaurant are the cash registers, to the left is a surprisingly well-sized (and very real) olive tree. In the glass enclosed space a bit further down you can watch staff making **pasta** during the day, and towards the back are the stations where you order and pick up your food, flanked by a large chalkboard with quirky sayings and pictures. Seating is either high stools and benches at thick wooden tables or low, red, lounge-y seats with bright red circular tables. Upstairs are more of the same types of seats, plus long sofa banquettes. On each of the wooden tables are little potted rosemary and basil plants, and upstairs there's a greenhouse-like area (called the herb garden) where they store the extras.

### The Atmosphere

The best (or worst, depending on your opinion) thing about Vapiano's concept is that there's no service. Ready to order? Head to the pasta, **pizza** or antipasti stations. Want a glass of wine? Make your way to the bar and pick one up. However, that's not to say that there's no staff: there are plenty of people around to clear your plates and give you a hand, should you need one, and each food station is manned with loads of cooks so that if it gets busy the queues shouldn't be very long. On one hand, you can spend as much time eating as you want - quick lunches, leisurely dinners - but on the other hand, if you want something you've got to get up and get it yourself.

Whilst the whole serve-yourself premises isn't exactly ideal for an intimate first date, it's perfect for large groups and skint students for whom the inevitable splitting of the bill inspires dread. And as there are no servers on hand to either disappear for long stretches or not-so-politely hint that there are people waiting for a table, you can pop in for a fast lunch or linger over a drink without worrying about how much time you're spending. The only thing to watch out for though is not to pile too much on your tray - and if you're sitting on the first floor be careful on the stairs!

### The Food

Although the concept may seem a bit fast food, the actual food is anything but, with pasta made on the premises fresh every day and key ingredients (like mozzarella) imported from Italy. Whilst there are a couple of salad options, mains are basically pizzas and pastas, so if you're not a fan of flour there aren't too many choices. Prices are decent, especially with the tourist trap that's Oxford Street right down the road, with main courses ranging from price brackets of £5.50 to £8.50. Pasta is made right in front of you (it only takes a couple of minutes) so you have the chance to specify what ingredients you want: a bit more chilli, a bit less salt. When you order a pizza they give you a buzzer, which goes off right as it's coming out of the **oven**.

Antipasti includes bruschetta, with sweet, plump diced **tomatoes** on thick slices of bread, and a piatto antipasti, ideal for sharing at £8.50. There's a huge variety of food on the plate: pesto-

covered bread; crisp, thin and long breadsticks, a salad of diced tomatoes and olives; thinly sliced salted prosciutto; pink, succulent crayfish; fresh fig wedges; creamy smoked salmon; roasted peppers and courgettes; Parmesan flakes and soft mozzarella. The Caesar salad is a decent portion at £5.50, with mozzarella, cherry tomatoes, peppery dressing and large, ciabatta-like croutons. For £2.50 extra you can add tender diced chicken with crispy skin.

Pasta choices include everything from the basic tomato sauce to granchi di fiumi, a dish made with juicy little crayfish, creamy lobster sauce and crunchy, snappy mange tout. For most of the dishes you can choose your own pasta, and there are pictures of the different types, so don't worry if you can't tell your tagliatelle from your linguine. Ravioli con carne is light and fluffy, the meat blended so it's smooth and the sauce thick and savoury. You can get about eight small slices from a pizza, and the tonno (tuna and red onions) is a good choice, with a nicely crispy base, although it's a bit too heavy on the tuna.

There are about five choices of desserts, which you can order either downstairs or upstairs at the bar. The tiramisu is a classic Italian pudding, and this one doesn't disappoint, with light and creamy layers and more than a hint of alcohol. The rice pudding is great, too; served in a cute little lidded jar, the pudding is thick and luscious with a good texture and ripe, sweet stewed strawberries on top.

### **The Drink**

There's a [wine](#) list of about twenty choices that's really well priced, starting at £11.50 per bottle and £3.15 per glass – mainly Italian with some new world bottles as well. The Araldica Piemonte Cortese from Italy is nicely full-bodied for a white wine, with slight hints of peach. Juices, iced teas, soft drinks and leaf teas (served in a big glass cup) are available as well, along with espresso, coffee and cappuccino and Italian and German beer.

### **The Last Word**

Some people will not like Vapiano. No matter the quality of the food, for some, self service is beneath them – that's what McDonalds is for, right? However, if you're willing to pick up a tray and get into the spirit of things a bit, it's a refreshing – and delicious – change from the norm.