

Fine peasant food – at oligarch prices

By TOM PARKER BOWLES EVENT FOR THE MAIL ON SUNDAY

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Onima

1-3 Avery Row, London W1

Rating: ★★★★★

I was expecting the worst, steeling myself for a gold-clad cacophony of nipped, tucked Hermès-toting excess. After all, Onima promises ‘five dimensions of pleasure,’ as if it were some futuristic marital aid, rather than a small Greek restaurant in the heart of Mayfair. A small Greek restaurant with a philosophy, no less... ‘We exist for the city’s most discerning pleasure-seekers,’ purrs the website, ‘...everything we do is designed to play with all five senses.’ And there was me looking for lunch.



The interior of Onima. The place isn't bad looking, in a slick, expensive, marble-and-mirrors Mayfair way

So I'm worried. Doubly so, because this is no usual review, rather a lunch with Fiona and Ross Wilson, who very generously bought Giles Coren (of The Times) and me at an auction in aid of the brilliant Felix Project. I know plenty of people who would pay NOT to spend a couple of hours in our company, but the Wilsons put charity over pleasure. Anyway, I arrive first, and am looked up and down like a piece of just-off meat. It takes me a while to convince them that I have a booking, and I'm led, at arm's length, to a wobbly table in a near-empty room.



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The place isn't bad looking, in a slick, expensive, marble-and-mirrors Mayfair way. French chanteurs croon over an immaculate stereo, while everything gleams and shines and glitters. Especially the teeth of the hunky, artfully be-stubbed fella next door, who seems to be midway through a photoshoot with a pair of bored-looking models. It turns out to be the owner, Alexandros Andrianopoulos, who was big on Mykonos. And wanted to bring a slice of the island 'vibe' to London.

The menu is Crazee Euro to its core, the sort of jet-set, fat-watch-wearing pan-global hotchpotch found from Moscow to Marbella, studded with truffles and wagyu, Jospier-grilled lobsters and caviar. Yet in among the Champagne-spraying bling are dishes from Italy, Greece and Japan. Our waiter insists on explaining the menu, despite our protestations. But the sommelier knows his stuff, and the floor staff are charming enough. As for the food... Damn, it's silly, bum-clenchingly expensive. £130 tomahawk steak. £90 seabass for two. A burger for £32. For a certain crowd, food only tastes good when the bill reaches four figures. Reassuringly expensive and all that.

But the cooking is really rather good. Often exceptional. Crisp discs of delicately battered aubergine and courgettes are piled one on top of the other and come with a tart, dill-spiked tzatziki dip. Sicilian red prawns, sweet and blissfully rich, come raw with olive oil and lemon. They remind me of Catania market. In everything but the £36 price. Tempura prawns (a heady £24), so often so turgid, are clad in the most gossamer-light of batters.



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Saganaki sees flawless fried cheese with lemon and herbs and a sharp lemon purée. As good as I once ate in Corfu. And Melbourne. But at £14, not exactly given away. Just like the spanakopita, the spinach and cheese flavours as big and bold as the crisp filo pastry is dainty. This is modern Greek food at its very best.

Main courses are pretty impressive too. A sticky, succulent poussin marinated in miso; roast rack of lamb with caponata, the beast cooked pink, the caponata blessed with pure agrodolce allure. Guazetto, a sort of sloppy, soupy fish stew, has a throaty submarine depth, and lots of silken mullet and prawns, while rabbit is a touch dull, despite all those olives and capers. A bowl of tonnarelli cacio e pepe pasta, though, is exceptional. Unforgettable. Although at £19, it's peasant food at oligarch prices.

Onima could have been a Bagatelle, but it's far superior to that. And yes, this is Mayfair. They know their crowd. Which is not really us. Still, it will keep the private-jet crew happy, their wives and mistresses too. Head chef Carmelo Carnevale sure can cook. It's just those prices I found difficult to digest.

About £80 per head