



Jamie's Italian

Over-hyped and over here, or a genuine breath of fresh air?
Deri Robins thinks it's just what Bath has been waiting for

It's a dark and rainy Wednesday night, but outside Jamie's, the inevitable queue of punters hunch their shoulders against the Bath drizzle.

Through the plate glass windows, they can glimpse the nirvana towards which they are slowly shuffling. Inside, snug and smug, those who have made it as far as the bar are tucking into free antipasti while soaking up a buzz that comprises the chatter of around 700 customers and the purposeful bustle of the young staff; chefs dodge each other in the frenetic open kitchen, and the feelgood music takes us back a decade or so, when the country first fell for a fresh-faced 19-year-old chef from Essex.

Presumably, it's been designed to do precisely that. It could be said that everything about this artfully targeted enterprise is designed to tap into the nation's ongoing love affair with Jamie. Nothing wrong with that! A shrewd head for business need not preclude a genuine passion for food, whether it's about provenance, cooking or presentation, and Jamie's passion is as genuine as it gets. He gives the same concentrated attention to the local gardener who tends the herb boxes in the Bath roof terrace as he does to any prime-time TV chat show host; more, if anything.

Having sprinkled his fairy dust over Bath, Jamie has since moved on to premises new

(Kingston and Brighton are open, Cardiff's next), but his influence is everywhere – there's even a chalk outline of his body drawn on the wall in one of the dining areas.

There are several of these, ranging from the bright and contemporary to the muted and artistically distressed. Mostly they're rammed – partly because the food offers unbelievably good value and partly because the vibe makes you feel you're anywhere but in Bath. At the same time, it makes you feel that much better about BEING in Bath – we've never had anything quite like this here before.

The modish urban design contrasts with the folksiness of the food (rustic Italian, but not

“We've never had anything quite like this in Bath before”



over-reverentially so). Giant hams and cheeses dangle from the ceiling, and the antipasti is served on long wooden planks; fresh pasta is made every day on the premises. After extensive research in his beloved Italy, Oliver has ensured that every imported ball of mozzarella and olive has the best possible provenance. You won't find anything quite as good elsewhere in the UK, mainly because he's bagged the exclusive rights.

If it's your first visit, don't miss the aforementioned antipasti (from £6.50) – bresaola, fennel-flecked salami, mortadella, prosciutto, sweet/salty pecorino – and that fluffy, delicate mozzarella (veggie version also available).

We were on our fourth visit (can't keep away!) and to ring the changes we shared a portion of crispy squid and one of mozzarella (can't resist it!) with 'lush basil pesto' – one of the many upbeat Jamie-isms that season the menu. The squid was meaty and fresh – net-caught off the south coast that morning – and came with a mayonnaise slightly spiced with roasted peppers.

Now, here's something that neither the menu nor the website will tell you: if you are a group of eight or more, and give the kitchen three days notice, you can order a whole suckling pig to be roasted for your kingly enjoyment. Why they are so remiss in flagging this up is a mystery.

There being just the two of us we'd ruled this possibility out, but on being informed that the daily special was roast belly pork, rolled and spit-roasted, I hastily bagged a portion before it sold out. £12.95 bought me two vast slices, the meat cooked to tender perfection, skin stickily chewy; the fat sweet as a nut, secret pockets of sage



700 covers, yet rammed to the recession-raising rafters...

adding an astringent note; the accompanying root vegetables tasted as if they'd been roasted in the meat juices, while a rocket accompaniment gained piquancy from a balsamic-infused jus.

He'd gone for the prawn linguini (£10.85) – thick, eggy strands of pasta, admirably al dente, in a slightly spicy, slightly garlicky sauce, mingled with such a generous amount of seafood that we started to worry about the restaurant's profit margins.

We lingered for a shared affogato (£4.25). I love this pudding at every stage of its meltingness, from the point when the hot espresso hits the ice-cream to the point in which it turns into the world's best iced coffee.

Some friends and colleagues have grumbled that the service here is slow; we found it briskly efficient with just the right amount of informal chumminess thrown into the mix. There's no

sense of being on a conveyor belt; the unspoken consensus seems to be that if you've queued for your table, you should be allowed to enjoy it for as long as you like.

Jamie's Italian may be part of a chain, but it doesn't feel like one. It's relentlessly charming, but not gratingly so. The staff are eager and well-trained; the food is extraordinarily good, the sourcing impeccable, the prices competitive.

Best of all, it's not boring. If the restaurant is a reflection of Jamie Oliver's personality, then he's as well-meaning, straight-up and fun as I've always believed him to be. His detractors may mutter about milking the cash cow, but as long as the cow in question is organic, well-cooked and brought to your table by someone brimming with the desire to please, this particular diner is perfectly happy. 🍷

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Visiting details

Opening hours: Monday - Saturday midday-11pm; Sunday midday-10.30pm
We visited: Wednesday evening
Prices: Dead reasonable – a pasta, salad and wine can cost as little as £12.20; our three-course meal for two with a carafe of Merlot cost £47.20.
Children? Warmly welcomed
Vegetarian choice: Good
Disabled access: Steps to negotiate
Wine list: Italian, oddity enough
Service and atmosphere: We've always found the staff sunny, efficient and helpful

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Crispy squid, and mozzarella in 'lush basil pesto'