



EORNA WALTON

bruschetta on offer as a starter: Romana (€4.30), a big slice of their toasted rustic bread topped with diced fresh tomato, garlic olive oil, and basil; and Classica (€4.25), with succulent melted mozzarella. We tucked in.

"Shall I make you up a nice plate to share?" suggested one of the chaps from behind the counter. We weren't objecting — absolutely gorgeous — Parma ham sliced from the bone, buffalo mozzarella, stuffed and unstuffed olives, grated Parmesan and unctuous olive oil, in a cloud of mixed leaves. We dunked and dipped and watched others have antipasti of salamis and Parma ham with chunks of delicious breads and cheeses.

Pastas and mains are €10.95-€14.95, among which are tortelloni ai quattro formaggi — fresh pasta stuffed with ricotta cheese and spinach served with a rich, creamy cheese sauce. Ravioli is stuffed with Parma ham and veal served with a creamy walnut sauce, while roast pork is a typical Roman recipe served with grated potatoes.

I had a big plate of lozenge-shaped gnocchi with gamey-flavoured Italian sausage and mushrooms (€13.95), from which the flavour was incredible.

Carmel had spaghetti carbonara (€10.95) — smoked bacon, herbs, black pepper and egg — addictive. From a selection of Italian wines sitting up on the counter, we went happily with the recommendation of Corte in Poggio Chianti DOC 2003 (€22.50).

We were hard aground, but displays of profiteroles, and "scoops" of dark chocolate filled with vanilla cream (and the reverse combination), looked luscious. With optional service, our bill came to €75.45.

Oh, yes, we did meet some local Dublin culture — two "young wans" strutting along with a ghetto-blaster which I wanted to wrap around their ears. ■

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SQUARE MEAL

Lucinda O'Sullivan ventures left off of the quays and discovers a brand-new, cosmopolitan Dublin in bloom — complete with one of the city's finest Italian restaurants

Are we in Dublin or Warsaw?" I said to Carmel, loading up our trolleys in Marks & Spencer in Mayor Square in the heart of Dublin's Docklands and Financial Services Centre. We seemed the only Irish customers in the store, as Russians, Poles and various other nationalities working and living in the area picked up their suppers. I am so used to whizzing down Custom House Quay heading for the East Link and out along the coast to where I live that I have never before turned left into this new world.

Mayor Square was an eye-opener — wide and spacious — with mainly new buildings, while the old Excise premises is now a bar of the same name. It was a Friday evening; crowds of 20-somethings were outside the Lagonda Bar — it had that look of a continental city, but then I suppose many of them were diehard smokers. The square is lined with cafes and food outlets, most of which seem to cater only for daytime business — O'Brien's, La Corte, the Swedish Food Company, Espresso Bar and Cabot & Co Wine Merchants.

Our destination had been

Zaps Steakhouse, which sported a big banner outside proclaiming an Indian buffet lunch — €9.95, and €14.95 for dinner. Bleak, grim and colourless, it was a lonely sight and beside Lagonda it seemed like Siberia. A selection of *bains-maries* was laid around in a square to the front of the restaurant — there were various curries, rices and chicken pieces, all looking about as appetising as a wet fish on a Saturday night.

The Indian lady who greeted us pointed to a table. "Could we sit at the next one?" I asked. "Yes," she said, but made no move to change the curry-stained paper tablecloth. "We'll move back — that's dirty," I said. The message brought no action. As well as the Indian buffet, the menu had steaks, burgers, racks of lamb, chicken wings — but, even for a seasoned food critic, there is a limit. We departed.

Il Fornaio is a deft little Italian spot across the square. I wrote about it when the first branch opened in Kilbarrack, where Anna Maria Cinelli has since been wowing people with authentic, simple Italian food. We sat down in the window of this informal little spot, suddenly feeling at home.

There are two varieties of