



Paolo Tullio

Lemon Tree

Town Square,
Blessington,
Co Wicklow
Tel: 045 900 000



THE VERDICT
FOOD 8/10
AMBIENCE 8/10
VALUE FOR MONEY 9/10
TOTAL 25/30

TRY A LITTLE TENDERNESS

Good food and service make this restaurant a Chinese blessing

Usually this is a time of year when I'm particularly grumpy. I'm just back from my annual trip to Italy, where I've eaten well, sat in blazing sunshine and had weeks of intense partying.

Grey skies do not a welcome home make. I hadn't read a newspaper, looked at a TV or listened to a radio for a month, so when I finally picked up a paper and read the news, I really wished I hadn't. Our political masters still seem like rabbits blinded in headlights, with no useful ideas about how to solve our many problems. It was back to reality with a bump.

The biggest shock of all was buying groceries again back here. There's a little shop in my Ital-

ian village and, like most little convenience stores, it's more expensive than the supermarkets, but very handy.

It took me a while to get used to the prices. I'd go down of a morning, buy bread, mozzarella, some tomatoes, a few eggs and a couple of large bottles of beer, and at first I'd start pulling a €20 note out of my wallet. It rarely cost more than a fiver. Most of the time I'd end up paying with the coins in my pocket.

It was the same in the local bar. A Bacardi and coke, a beer and a Fernet Branca was €4.50 — a price we'd normally pay for a single drink. It's no wonder, then, that restaurants here cost more than they do there, the raw ingredients cost far more.

I hadn't seen my son Rocco for a while, so we took to the road with his friend Charlie Slevin to go to the Lemon Tree, a Chinese restaurant in Blessington. On the evening we went the skies were serene and West Wicklow was bathed in a warm, summery glow. We found the Lemon Tree easily enough, it's on the main street in a new building, opposite the Downshire Hotel.

Inside it's nicely laid out: there's space between the tables and the room has been well divided. We got the menus and decided that I would eat from the table d'hôte and Rocco and Charlie would eat from the à la carte.

Looking at the menu I was happy to see that it wasn't one of those really long menus with page after page of options, which always

make me suspicious. It was long enough to give plenty of choices, but no more than that.

With me driving and Rocco and Charlie doing a week of detox, we ordered no wine, although a complimentary glass of wine came with my set menu. Instead, both my guests ordered ginger ale and I asked for a large bottle of mineral water, only to discover that they only have quarter bottles. I decided to drink iced tap water. I expected the jug to be left on the table, but the water was poured for us and our waiter came back endlessly to keep our glasses topped up. None of the waiting staff seemed to mind this extra work.

We made our order and it went like this: Rocco had the king prawns with chilli to start with and Charlie had the quarter aromatic duck, while I chose the barbecue spare ribs from the set dinner. For main courses Rocco had the Amber Fire steak, Charlie had the king prawns Szechuan style and I had the beef with black-bean sauce.

After our order had been taken we got a basket of prawn crackers to nibble on while we waited. I haven't mentioned the prices yet, but they are very reasonable. The set dinner was €19.90 for two courses and included a glass of wine, and the à la carte main courses were €16.80 and €13.80. The only things that looked overpriced to me were the drinks — €3 for a quarter bottle of ginger ale and €2.80 for an espresso — but, then again, if they're not making much on the food, they have to make it somewhere else.

The starters arrived and Charlie's aromat-

ic duck was probably the best version of it that I've tasted in Ireland. It came as usual with the bamboo basket of pancakes, the plum sauce and the duck pre-shredded. It seemed unusually tender to me, and Rocco's king prawns were tasty and succulent. I wasn't expecting much from my barbecue ribs, but they were surprisingly good, well flavoured and totally tender.

Tenderness seemed to be the word of the night because two of our main courses were beef and both of them were made up of really tender meat. The Amber Fire beef that Rocco had chosen was probably the dish of the night for us, and it transpired that this is one of their signature dishes. We also enjoyed the beef in black-bean sauce that I'd ordered, although none of us were enthusiastic about the Szechuan-style king prawns, finding them just a little too sweet. Apart from this small point, the dishes we'd had up to this moment were far ahead of similarly priced Chinese restaurants in Dublin.

Both Rocco and Charlie fancied a dessert, and the dessert menu is one of those that has pictures on it. Charlie chose the iced nougat and Rocco chose the Tartufo, a chocolatey dessert that's really common in Italy. I settled on an espresso and after that I asked for the bill. I'm looking at it now and it appears that my main course, which should have been part of my set menu charge, was charged for again, which means that I've overpaid by €12.80. However, I didn't get a chance to add a tip on my credit card, which I would have willingly done since the service was excellent, so that extra payment can be my tip.

The three of us enjoyed our meal in The Lemon Tree, the food is good, the service is friendly and efficient and there's a strong sense that the front of house team are trying to please their customers.

My bill of €110 didn't seem a lot for three dinners. ☐

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