

Dashing into town for Friday lunch on a whim, with a dissolute friend over from hippy-dippy Brighton, seemed like a jolly plan, until we arrived at the **Lennox Café Bistro** and found that, despite it being well past lunchtime, there was not a seat to be had in the cosy room. “I will show you upstairs,” said our waitress, and my heart sank. The Lennox Café is adorable, a busy little room filled with paintings, flowers and cupcakes, and my experience of upstairs rooms in most restaurants is seriously grim. Happily, upstairs at the Lennox is just as cheering as down. Plenty of sparkling mirrors, picture wallpaper, black and white prints of *Ye Olde Portobello* and a roaring fire. This was super-welcome, despite the seasons being technically well advanced into spring, and we huddled up next to it. The Lennox is an excellent example of what can be done with sufficient imagination and dedication. These rooms are neither architecturally impressive nor particularly spacious, and yet the general feel is wonderfully clean, bright and pretty.

We were joined by other friends keen to bunk off work early and see the *Dissolute One*, and we ordered, between us, a selection of dishes from what is an instantly appealing lunch menu with a slightly higgledy-piggledy feel to it – chicken and broccoli bake sits alongside quesadilla with smoked chicken, roasted peppers, gruyere and guacamole; and bruschetta with roasted Mediterranean veg, black olives and cherry tomatoes. Seemingly, chef Albert Broderick (ex *Commons* and *Berkeley Court*) has created a menu based on the food he loved growing up. Luckily, it’s the kind of food I loved growing up too.

Food appeared promptly, and was almost universally impressive. The Lennox club sandwich with grilled chicken breast, smoked bacon and slow-roasted plum tomato (€11.95) was a real winner. In a crusty bap rather than the usual neat, faintly depressing triangles of toasted pan, it was tender and juicy. Lennox fish and chips (€14.95) was a hunk of delicately-cooked cod in a light batter, with chips that were more wedge than fry, but crisp and tasty; while the tartar sauce and pea purée that accompanied the fish both acquitted themselves honourably. My fresh crab salad with pink grapefruit, avocado and basil dressing (€13.95) came with a medium-boiled quail’s egg, a couple of giant caper berries and a heap of baby leaves, lightly dressed and tossed with toasted pine nuts, which reminded me that I haven’t seen nearly half enough of these in recent times; the searchlight of fashion seems to have somewhat swept past them.



Down the local

Nothing beats your favourite neighbourhood haunt. EMILY HOURICAN gatecrashes two village hotspots to see what all the fuss is about.

Also accompanying it was some very nice, malty, homemade brown bread. The crab was lightly dressed, plentiful and delicious, but the grapefruit just didn’t do it for me. I can see the principle of taste-contrast, but it was slightly too bitter. And so I sidelined it, and the rest of the dish was a joy, working perfectly together.

Staff wear neatly-ironed pale blue shirts, which creates a very good impression, and were jolly, friendly and attentive (sometimes, in these upstairs rooms, one can feel quite forgotten). They pressed politely, caringly even, for us to have dessert, and when I found bread and butter pudding on offer, that was me sold. This came with crème Anglaise and vanilla ice-cream (€5.50). The ice-cream I could have done without – overkill if you ask me – but the pudding itself was really good, slightly sticky and resistant to the spoon, not a big mushy mess. Cupcakes on pretty plates arrived for the others, along with some excellent espressos, and a very respectable bill. Sadly, *Portobello* is not my neighbourhood, but after this, I may find myself wandering by way more often.

Valparaiso is discreetly located above Goggins pub in Monkstown, with the entrance tucked away round the side. Whatever it is they’ve been doing up there for the last 19 years, it’s clearly working. The place was buzzing on a recent Sunday evening visit. Granted, it was one of those days annexed by Hallmark as a celebration of something that should really be celebrated every day, but still, five sittings – so the waitress told me – is impressive by any standards.

I had half expected a garish, “I-am-from-Espain”-type vibe from Valparaiso, but, in fact, this is a sleek, stylish and warmly understated spot, with plenty of cream and brown tones, lovely blond wood floors, and ultra-simple lines. Service is cheery and attentive and the menu – €25.95 for three courses – a kind of next generation version of classic European fare.

In fact, I’m guessing the enduring popularity of this neighbourhood favourite is largely thanks to the menu – a clever down-the-middle exercise in giving the people what they want but without patronising them by making it bland and samey.

RESTAURANT

TWO TO TRY



NASH 19 This is exactly the kind of simple, irresistible local café that makes you wonder why everything can't be this good. For over 20 years, Claire Nash has been delighting her many loyal regulars with fresh, home-cooked fare. Bread, cakes and scones are baked daily while specials change constantly, depending on what's in season. Expect simple, classy dishes such as grilled hake with chive champ or chicken and mushroom pasta, while kids get a three-course menu of their own, based on daily specials and not the usual grizzly frozen burgers 'n' chips-type fodder. Love, care and attention are evident throughout this heart-warming operation.
Nash 19, 19 Princes Street, Cork, 021 427 0880; www.nash19.com



NIMMO'S Nimmo's has long been a Galway fixture, an atmospheric, medieval, stone customs house overlooking the Claddagh basin, and when Aoibheann McNamara's Ard Bia moved into the premises, it seemed a match made in heaven. By day there is the Ard Bia café, dishing up delicious salads, seafood, fresh juices and home-bakes, while by night Nimmo's serves North African-influenced food, though always within the bounds of what's local and seasonal. With its open-plan kitchen, candles and quirky art, Nimmo's is lively, buzzy and much loved.
Nimmo's, Ard Bia, Spanish Arch, Galway, 091 539897; www.ardbia.com



Husband and I settled in with a huge stack of newspapers – it had been a busy type of day with little time for leisurely reading about Glenda/Johnny/Rosanna – and picked at some nice warm bread, plain and tomato and fennel, while waiting for our starters. Our state of cosy relaxation was momentarily interrupted by a burst of flames as husband's copy of *The Observer* dipped too close to the candle and caught fire. A pleasant smell of smoke coming, I thought at first, from the open fire in a corner of the room filled the air, and I guess a split second later and we would have had some serious drama on our hands. As it was, husband managed to fold it all up tight and kill the fire before anyone really noticed, except a man sitting opposite, who gave us a conspiratorial wink.

Starters then arrived. I had goujons of lemon sole, which turned out to be two entire fillets, rolled and very lightly battered and fried until crisp and brown, and served with a subtle, soothing homemade tartar sauce. Husband's duck liver and foie gras parfait with fig and pear chutney was rather delicious, but too rich and moussey for me. But then, what would you expect from duck liver and foie gras parfait?

Next up, an excellent wild mushroom and spinach tart with cèpe sauce for me. Light-as-air puff pastry, with a good shortness to it, topped with a rich, earthy combination of mushrooms and leaf spinach. Now, I don't know my wild mushrooms, I really couldn't tell a horn of plenty from a chanterelle, but these tasted

impeccable. Fleshy but fascinating. With it was a salad of rocket and Parmesan, a nice, simple accompaniment. Husband, meanwhile, was making his way through a truly delicious grilled sirloin of beef, with chive mash and shallot and tarragon butter, in which the tarragon was wonderfully evident. A generous bowl of chips on the side (€2 extra) were thin and crisp.

It had been a weekend of indulgence, so we rather modestly chose one dessert between the two of us – milk chocolate and praline mousse with orange cream and orange caramel, which arrived in a sort of cylinder shape, topped-and-tailed with a darker chocolate crust containing bits of something crunchy – puffed rice possibly. This was jolly good, although I would love to try a version made with dark chocolate, but maybe that's just me. The orange cream was delicate and pretty, but the orange caramel was a bit much. Luckily it was restricted to a drizzle around the outside of the plate, and easily avoided.

Two glasses of a pleasant Argentinian Malbec from what is a short but efficient wine list, plenty of water and a coffee, and we were done. Meanwhile, the fifth sitting was busily getting underway and all was bright and bustling. ■

CONTACT

LENNOX CAFÉ BISTRO, 31 Lennox Place, Dublin 8, 01 478 9966

VALPARAISO, Monkstown Road, Monkstown, Co Dublin, 01 280 1992; www.valparaiso.ie