

Restaurant: Maxelâ, London SW7

'This place might as well be subtitled "Up yours, vegetarians!" '

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Saturday 30 March 2013 09.00 GMT

The frontage of this small restaurant deviates from its neighbours quite dramatically. There's no menu, no decoration, no view into the interior. Instead, it looks a bit like Leatherface's larder, with massive chunks of meat lolling on the floor or dangling from hooks, and nothing to soften the impact of so much dead animal. It might as well be subtitled, "Up yours, vegetarians!"

You enter a room dominated by a massive chiller cabinet bursting at the seams with meat: sausages, Flintstone-ish ribeyes and T-bones and porterhouses, all a vivid, carnal red. The bar and restaurant - decor limited to rows of plates and a blackboard depicting cuts of beef - seem perfunctory, an afterthought.

This is the first venture abroad for a small Italian chain born in Genoa's meat district (the name, Maxelâ, is dialect for butcher) that has spread through northern Italy and as far south as Rome. There's a distinctly Genoese flavour to the menu, from its bean-heavy minestrone to its latte dolce fritto (sweet fried milk) for dessert.

Samuele, a compact dude in a very large cardigan, is enthusiastic, lovely. That's why we let him choose our wine and end up with a Cervaro chardonnay/grechetto at nearly 70 quid a bottle. But, oh, it's peachy - up there with a fine burgundy - and when I Google its price, I find it's £40 retail, so all is forgiven. (Also, the largely foreign clientele - lots of puffa-jacketed Italians - don't look too concerned about cost.)

He brings out a tray of steaks for us to perv over. We choose a 30-day-aged ribeye and a 45-day-aged T-bone, one scarlet, one deepest burgundy, both inches thick. Samuele shaves off slivers of raw meat for us - "If you're brave enough..." It's astoundingly clean-tasting, mineral and deeply beefy. I can't wait until it hits the grill.

Maxelâ's USP is imported Fassone beef: Piedmontese cattle with almost magical properties. The menu says it's "proven to lower cholesterol". Yeah, right. So I do some digging and the truth is quite remarkable: a rogue gene gives the animal a rare condition known as "double-muscling", delivering meat that's low in fat, low in cholesterol (lower even than chicken or salmon) and high in beneficial fatty acids. But the most bizarre thing is that it cooks like the most fat-laced, marbled, high-cholesterol, evil badass steak on the planet: tender, smoky, juicy, bloody lovely stuff. I resolve to become a millionaire, so I can eat nothing else. Expensive? Well, of course it is.

The steak knives arrive plunged viciously into a wooden block just before the meat, a we-mean-business statement of intent. The steaks don't appear to have shrunk at all

during their fierce grilling. We could choose to have them topped with the likes of pears and balsamic, or gorgonzola and walnut, but why you'd want to do that to meat such as this is beyond me. The 30-day beef is impressive, but it's the older, riper cut that leaves a lasting impression - as rich as anything I've eaten here or the States, almost gamey, cutting like butter even though we've asked for it rare.

Maxelâ is a blast, but it's all about the steaks. Our other choices are mostly a bit on the sad side: limp roasted vegetables, "roast potatoes" that look like frozen oven wedges, anodyne caponata with none of the sweet-sour bravura of the real Sicilian thing. Gnocchi with pesto should be aced - Genoa is pesto's homeland - but although the little dumplings are handmade, the sauce lacks seasoning and vibrancy. But they make no bones about it: the menu declares, "Ask your server for our... (not many) vegetarian options."

If I'm honest, I'm not that bothered: the homemade focaccia is pillowy, and I'm newly obsessed with lardo d'Arnad (from Aosta, and a finer feast, to my mind, than the better-known Colonnata). And those steaks, man, I could live on them. And forever avoid the statins while I'm at it.

. **Maxelâ** 84 Old Brompton Road, London SW7, 020-7589 5834. Open all week, lunch noon-3pm, dinner 6-11pm; Sat & Sun noon-11pm. From about £40 a head, plus drinks and service.

Food 6/10 (10/10 for the steaks)

Atmosphere 7/10

Value for money 8/10

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