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REFUEL



THE CHAMELEON

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- TYPICAL DISH:** Rijsttafel
- RECOMMENDED:** Bali rijsttafel
- THE DAMAGE:** €73.75 for rijsttafel for two and five beers
- ON THE STEREO:** Radiohead
- AT THE TABLE:** Parties
- WHAT TO WEAR:** Monsoon
- DO SAY:** Mi mesa es su mesa
- DON'T SAY:** Fend for yourself

More than a fair share

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Here's something motherhood has taught me: sharing is not a virtue we Irish are born with. Especially when it comes to food. "Caring is sharing" is a mere platitude to the Irish toddler, whose Kevlar-coated little heart beats to the tune of "finders keepers, losers weepers".

A stór, I hear myself say, Ruaidhri has come all the way from Ranelagh to play. Now give him a slug of that papaya smoothie. Mamaí, he replies, you must be smoking crack. Sharing is for sissies.

Thus, the Irish child grows into a man who eats with one eye on everybody else's plate to make sure nobody gets more than him. Perhaps it's historical. A post-colonial throwback? The modern anthropological inevitability of a post-famine society? Or maybe we're spud-grabbing savages, after all.

There's no excuse for it, really. Look at what's going on in Middle East, yet the Arabs can share a mezze plate without

bloodshed. Then there's the long-famished Chinese, who have forgone their civil rights but withhold enough decorum to take dim sum. The Swedes have the smorgasbord. The Spanish have tapas. Even bonobo apes in Africa share their food.

Observe, then, the adult Irish male when you take him to dine-a-deux at The Chameleon. The waitress explains to you the concept of rijsttafel – a banquet of regional Indonesian dishes will be brought to share, the bowls are small, but they will number at least a dozen. It's a Dutch-colonial take on communal eating, and I'm looking forward to the intimacy of sharing. Ui Rathaile, on the other hand, has taken a turn against it. He goes off on one about Imperialism. But really what he's thinking is: what's mine is mine. You keep yer southern paws to yourself.

There are six rijsttafel menus, each named after an Indonesian island. They range in price from €25 to €35 per person, and there are six to eight dishes per menu. Chopsticks are provided, but Ui Rathaile was ready to strike with his fork

Leading the pageant was a bowl of pungent Chinese cabbage leaves, part soft, part crunchy, speckled with sesame seeds and tangled with ribbons of sweet, slippery onion. Alongside them a bowl of crispy squid rings, which demanded to be eaten immediately, before floppiness took hold. Ui Rathaile took care of that, tossing a single hoop my way, so that I could testify to its freshness.

Noodles – or bami goreng – were firm and covered in a slick of soy sauce, their texture cranked up with a smattering of beansprouts, while the predominant flavour was of marinated garlic. Ui Rathaile professed an indifference towards satay, giving me licence to monopolise the moist and gently spiced chicken-breast skewers. They were good, but satay is too ubiquitous to excite my appetite.

That task fell instead to the square of Tipperary pork belly, which was slow cooked to perfection. Beneath its caramelised crust were layers of tender meat, sticky with star anise sauce and so delicious that my instinct was to covet, not to share.

Less irresistible, but still desirable, was the kari java: kofta-like lamb meatballs, served in fragrant, coconut-milk curry. Beside them was a bowl with marinated chicken dressed in another coconut-based sauce, this time with an aromatic kick of lemongrass and lime. What else? Jasmine rice... and a salad that was a riot of exotic flavour and colour: cucumber, mango, sesame, peanuts and Chinese greens.

Perhaps inevitably, there was one dish that disappointed: a beef curry, infused with coconut and cinnamon that seemed to contradict, not complement, the meat's robust flavour.

That aside, there's no debating The Chameleon is in a different league to its **Temple Bar** neighbours, and it's unusual to find an ethnic restaurant so committed to Irish suppliers, all of which are named on the menu.

This allegiance to quality shines through in the cooking. With five bottles of beer (Asahi and Budvar), the rijsttafel for two came to just over €70. Our friendly, helpful waitress promised us a vivid feast, and that's what we got – a colonial banquet that was a pleasure to share, albeit with a **died-in-the-wool** Mé Féiner.