



Andrew Dargue and
Donna Conroy, owners
of Vanilla Black

WORDS: OLIVIA GREENWAY

VANILLA BLACK

Defining high-end
vegetarian dining,
London restaurant

Vanilla Black has
amassed great reviews
and enviable industry
acclaim. It wasn't an
easy ride, though, and
now the owners are set
to do it all over again...

If you had told Donna Conroy and Andrew Dargue when they first met in 1990 that one day they'd not only work together in a Michelin-rated vegetarian restaurant in London, but also own it, they would probably have laughed in disbelief. Although Andrew was working as a chef, they were both meat-eaters, they lived in the northeast and Donna was happily employed as a nurse.

Over the next few years, they both became vegetarian. This wasn't a problem at home, but when they went out to eat, they found the choices were quite poor. 'You should do nice vegetarian food,' Donna said. 'Then I won't have to eat food like this.' Giving the idea careful consideration, Andrew started preparing vegetarian food to test out his ideas, supplying local chefs on a wholesale basis.

The couple then began to search for a restaurant

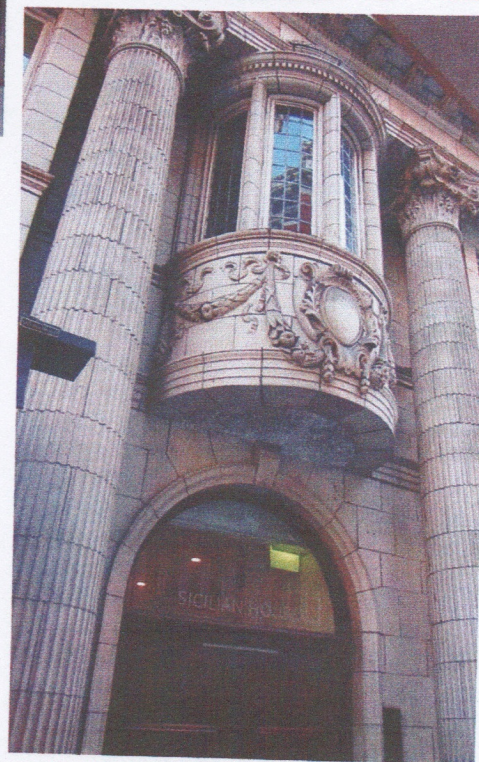
near where they lived and ended up with premises in York. Without much fanfare, 28-cover Vanilla Black opened in 2004. The fact that Donna had never worked in a restaurant before, never mind being front of house, and gave up a career she loved, is testament to her faith in their project and her complete confidence in Andrew to be able to pull it off.

Food-wise, Andrew wanted to break down the old stereotypes and resolved not to serve pasta, spicy food or meat substitutes, the easy cop-out of many other veggie places, in his view. 'We didn't want people just to come to the restaurant because it is vegetarian, but because we serve good food that happens to be vegetarian.'

The restaurant was an instant success and in only two years found itself in the Michelin guide. But the



Sicilian Avenue, home to Andrew and Donna's new venture, Orchard



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ambitious pair wanted more. Andrew says they grew out of York very quickly. 'We had done what we set out to do. We wanted somewhere bigger and better, a new challenge.'

London's calling

Andrew and Donna considered carefully where to move to, even contemplating Paris at one point, but eventually settled on London. 'Central York property prices are high; London prices didn't seem massively different, so we thought, why not?'

Here is where the tale takes another turn. Opening a small restaurant near where they lived is one thing; opening a huge place in London with the attendant risks is quite another. They would have to find the perfect site, sort out living accommodation, get staff, probably refurbish and source new suppliers. Restaurant failure rates are notoriously high.

Undeterred, Andrew and Donna spent the next year travelling to London every week to find premises. They knew exactly what they wanted, but it didn't seem to exist. 'We wanted somewhere nice. We have a regular customer – I'll call him Mr X. He is wealthy and quite particular. Every time we found a

possible place, the acid test was "Would Mr X come here?" We kept looking until the answer to the question was "yes".'

'Yes' was a smart building on the borders of the City, stuffed with legal types from nearby offices, tucked away near Chancery Lane, well off the tourist drag. It had been the site of three short-lived restaurants in the past, but the pair knew it was right for them. Relieved to have found their dream location, Donna and Andrew now got to work deciding on the layout and fixtures and fittings.

'Again, we wanted to get away from the vegetarian stereotype of purple walls. We wanted something simple and gracious, something in keeping with the history of the area. So, for example, we had a Chesterfield sofa, an old valve radio and Bakelite phone as ornaments, and a simple chandelier. But mainly, we wanted Vanilla Black to be about the food.'

Avoiding labels

Andrew is keen that people understand his food vision. He doesn't like 'gourmet' as that sounds too pompous. I suggest 'original'. He nods in part-agreement. 'If people say, "Let's eat a Chinese meal", the reaction isn't, "I'm not Chinese". Similarly, if you suggest an Italian, or an Indian or a Thai meal, they don't have a problem. So why should people's reaction to a vegetarian restaurant be "I'm not vegetarian"? It's the old stigma of vegetarian restaurants not being very good, and not serving exciting and interesting food. I'm really trying to buck that trend.'

He works on flavours, textures and aromas to replicate the same intensity one would get with a meat dish. 'You can't get our food in a recipe book;

it doesn't exist. Every dish is started from scratch, from an idea. We work very hard on our ideas. Some of them just don't work, but many do and develop into a dish that goes on our menu.' He visits as many restaurants as he can, to get inspiration and cites as diverse a group as Alain Passard at L'Arpège in Paris, Andrew Pern at the Star in Yorkshire, and Thomas Keller at the French Laundry and Per Se as chefs whose work he admires.

He likes deconstructing dishes, taking a well-known dish apart and putting it together again with different elements. For example, his popular poached egg and Ribblesdale pudding with smoked potato croquette and pineapple pickle (see recipe on page 32) is based on the gammon and pineapple

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Cep custard and fluid lemon jelly
with sesame crisp and parsley

a Porsche,' remarks Andrew ruefully, but the sense of pride he feels in succeeding in pulling off this feat in the teeth of one of the UK's worst recessions, is almost palpable.

Without the arrogance often associated with successful chefs, and being a softly spoken, albeit straight-talking northerner, one can't imagine Andrew turning his restaurants into the sort of places where one goes just to be seen. It will always be about the food. But that doesn't stop him being rather pleased that Joanna Lumley was a recent visitor and, as I type, Cherie Blair is tucking into her lunch.

FIND OUT MORE

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Cep custard and fluid lemon jelly with sesame crisp and parsley

Serves 8 • Prep 40 mins • Cook 30 mins

For the fluid lemon jelly:

100ml freshly squeezed lemon juice
25ml water
15g sugar
pinch of salt
3g agar agar

For the cep custard:

200ml milk
400ml cream
10 free-range egg yolks, gently whisked
20g powdered ceps

For the sesame wafer:

1 free-range egg white
85g icing sugar
50g softened butter
60g plain flour
6 tarragon leaves
10g sesame seeds

parsley and a little extra-virgin oil, to serve

1 For the fluid lemon jelly, gently heat the lemon juice, water, sugar and salt to dissolve

the sugar. Add the agar agar, whisk in and simmer for 1 minute to activate. Allow to set completely, then add to a blender and whizz until smooth.

2 For the cep custard, heat the milk and cream to 85C. Add the egg yolks and whisk vigorously, bringing back to 85C, then immediately remove from the heat. Add the cep powder and season with salt. Allow to cool.

3 Preheat the oven to 150C/fan 130C/gas 2. For the sesame wafer, beat the egg whites with the sugar until soft peaks appear. Slowly add the butter, then the flour. Fold in the tarragon and sesame seeds. Spread thinly over silicone paper and bake for 8-10 minutes until crisp. Store in an airtight container until ready to use.

4 To assemble, add the cep custard to a piping bag and squeeze dots of the custard in a random pattern on the plate. Next add the jelly to a piping bag and run lines around the plate. Pick some parsley, dress in a little extra-virgin olive oil and arrange on the plate. Finally, break the wafer into small pieces, stand in the custard and serve.

■ PER SERVING 414 cals, fat 33.5g, sat fat 18.5g, protein 7.5g, carbs 22.5g, sugars 17g, fibre 0.5g, salt 0.5g