

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

Finedining





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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 t 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

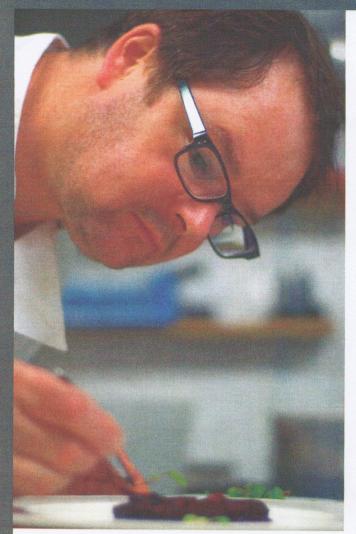
Andrew is keen that people understand his food vision. He doesn't like 'gourmet' as that sounds too pompous. I suggest 'original'. He nods in partagreement. 'If people say, "Let's eat a Chinese meal", the reaction isn't, "I'm not Chinese". Similarly, if you suggest an Italian, or an Indian or a Thai 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



with chips many of us remember from our childhood. Similarly, poached duck egg yolk, whipped spinach, crispy bread, seeds and mustard oil is based on the ubiquitous egg mayonnaise sandwich.

'What about vegans?' I ask. 'We are happy to cater for vegans but they need to give us notice, as do coeliacs and anyone else who can't eat everything off our regular menu. We did try offering more vegan dishes in the early days, but they were not too popular and the wastage was high.'

True grit

With plain wooden floors, fresh lilies and linen-clothed tables, 46-cover Vanilla Black in London opened for business in April 2008. Naysayers immediately jumped on the white and grey walls, complaining that the place was cold and soulless. In July, a well-known food blogger wrote, 'I'll give them a month'.

Takings in the early days showed a similar story. Till readings for their second week totalled £352. That's quite worrying when your rent and rates alone are £1,700 a week. They had a small boost to their confidence in October when Tracey Macleod, food critic of *The Independent*, wrote that it was 'the best vegetarian restaurant I've been to in this country'.



WIN! TABLE FOR TWO

To celebrate the opening of Orchard, Donna and Andrew have generously invited a reader plus a guest to be among the first to dine at their new venture, enjoying a complimentary meal at the lovely Sicilian Avenue in Central London. Why not make a day of it and combine your special dining experience with some retail therapy or a day of museums or art galleries? Turn to page 55 for details on how to enter.



But with their house in York on the line, Donna and Andrew were still struggling. 'I'm not going to pretend criticism doesn't hurt. Of course it does. But we were determined to succeed,' Andrew recalls. They battled on and finally started to turn the corner about 18 months after they opened, towards the end of 2009

Around then, a customer told her sister, a public relations expert, how much she had enjoyed her meal and wondered whether Vanilla Black had PR representation. With a PR on board, the restaurant could now get the recognition it deserved. Articles appeared in newspapers such as *Metro* and more notable food critics visited.

This, together with good old word-of-mouth, saw more people booking a table and increased repeat business. From just Andrew in the kitchen, they now employ six chefs and, interestingly, over half of their customers were not vegetarian. Finally, in 2010, Vanilla Black received a recommendation from the Michelin guide, a fantastic feat for any restaurant, never mind a vegetarian one. Vanilla Black had arrived.

You would now expect the pair to give a huge sigh of relief and the tale to end happily there, but no, the couple are pushing themselves further.

The new Black

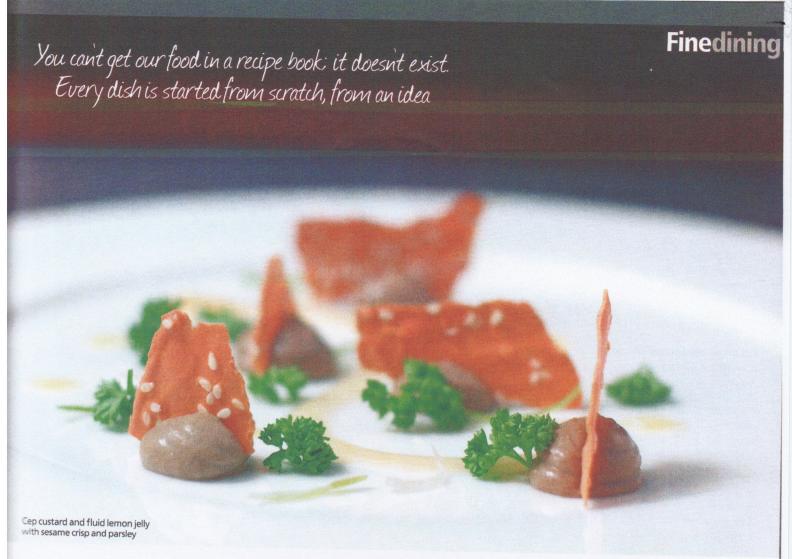
Their new idea is a more casual deli/restaurant called Orchard, which they plan to open in the spring. They named it 'Orchard' because

Andrew is a great fan of British produ thinks of orchards when he thinks of Just round the corner from Vanilla Bla in a lovely location – Sicilian Avenue – 1910 and oozing architectural charm.

The Avenue is based on Burlington in Piccadilly – but without the roof – has bow-fronted shops with curved white marble pillars and grey-stone. The establishment is going to be mo market, open for breakfast, lunch ar dinners, and incorporate a small grow section. 'We're going to sell our own heritage potatoes, eggs, butter and from our forager, such as scurvy gravasters and sea beet.'

Andrew wants to offer something different from the usual lunchtime fatocus on British foods. 'We've just so some rather special authentic tin mu we are going to serve soup in themparsnip bread; other choices could be mixed beets and home-made piccali soda bread soldiers; or purple sproubroccoli, English mustard dumplings ale reduction.'

He and Donna will have their wor out, alternating between the two lo but from talking to Andrew, it's clea is their passion. They have also just I they've been awarded two AA roset Vanilla Black, the highest award for restaurant. All their hard work is stai to pay off, but they haven't done it I money. 'We still rent a flat and I dor



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

Vanilla Black 17–18 Tooks Court London EC4A 1LB Tel: 020 7242 2622 www.vanillablack.co.uk

Orchard

Orchard 11 Sicilian Avenue London WC1A 2QH Tel: 020 7831 2715

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

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

For the cep custard:

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

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