

Marrakech

The Salisbury Life dining out team were transported, if only for a lunchtime, to Morocco, where they feasted not only on fine, authentic cuisine, but also on a rich serving of nostalgia

Some things you never forget. When I was 16, my parents took me on holiday to Morocco. I didn't want to go. There was a party back home I was dismayed to be missing, and I didn't much like the sound of a land of sand. But I've never forgotten it. The desert flowers, berber tents, lush green mountains and souks with their dark and mysterious alleyways make up the tapestry of a potent first love.

The food, I remember, was itself a new territory to explore, heady, aromatic concoctions introducing the scents of coriander, cumin and saffron, the sweetness of sandalwood, the new and unexpected uses of mint.

They say you should never revisit something your memory holds so precious, and I haven't... or not quite. Because once inside the door of Salisbury's Marrakech restaurant-cafe, the music, warm orange walls, tiled tables, Moroccan ornaments and landscape paintings took me back with a jolt. Mind you, to get the full Moroccan effect, you need to sit with your back to the window unless, as my friend Julia suggested, the cafe creates a Moroccan style mural on the oh-so British slice of grey walling outside. Alternatively, you might like to come in the evening, when lovely blinds shut out England altogether, while on Saturday evenings, belly dancing helps convince you that this is, indeed, a little corner of Morocco.

Julia is a new convert to all things Moroccan, having spent a glorious Easter this year travelling around the country with her husband and two small children. She cast an expert eye over the menu and specials board and said everything sounded very authentic, while the starters in particular served her well as a vegetarian.

She started with a dish we both liked the sound of, apricot feta cheese and spinach bourak (£6.25), a delicious filo pastry



A convincingly good slice of Morocco

parcel which captured something of a sweet and sour effect - rich, but not overpoweringly so. It was, appropriately enough, a blisteringly hot day, and I was in heaven basking in the breeze from a very efficient fan and feasting on a steamed and marinated fresh artichoke salad with black olives (£5.25) - wonderfully clean flavours and perfect for summer.

For her main course, Julia chose to upgrade a starter - felaful with green salad and olives (£6.90) - and said it was delicious. The dish came with cucumber and chilli dip and lemon mayo dip which, she said, turned the lovely into the out-of-the-ordinary. I felt I could not possibly eat Moroccan without sampling the tagine - there were several options, including

beef and a vegetarian variety, but I chose lamb with apricots (£10.95), with a side dish of spinach instead of the more usual rice or bread for a lighter effect perfect for lunchtime. It was fabulous - rich, tasty and with that alluring sweetness I remember from all those years ago.

Speaking of sweet things, when Julia visited Morocco, oranges were, she said, 'literally dripping off the trees', so dessert usually saw them peeled, sliced and layered with cinnamon. I think she expected to find the same thing here, but then, there aren't many orange trees in Salisbury, and anyway, the fabulous range of desserts more than compensated. "We just weren't used to treats like this," she said, wading into a plate of patisseries marocaine (£8), a selection of pastries for two (to spare her blushes, I will add that she took some home for her children). They were served with mint tea or coffee, and when she chose the tea she was given a pair of scissors to cut her own mint from a pot on the windowsill - a nice touch.

I, meanwhile, had Berber pancakes (£5) which were lemony and lovely, the name conjuring up all sorts of images from the past. Nostalgia had Julia firmly in its grip, too - she contacted me a day or so later to say that the meal had made her long to return to Morocco so much, she and her husband were "seriously considering another trip next Easter". And me? Never return? Look carefully at the pile of papers on my desk, and you may spot a certain travel brochure...

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