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**food**

**VEG IT**

**Vegetarian food has come a long way since the days of lettuce and lentils. Kirsty Tuxford investigates**

**Viva la Vida**

This is a tiny health food shop and eat-in or takeaway buffet with a handful of stools and a couple of benches outside, meaning you can dine *al fresco*.

You help yourself and pay for your food depending on the weight on your plate. I stuff down Hindu vegetable curry, soya and spinach lasagne, falafel, and a muesli, mushroom, rocket, sultana and spinach salad with strawberry vinaigrette.

The food gains top marks for healthfulness alone, never mind the delectable mixture of flavours. *Viva la Vida, Las Huertas, 57, tel: 91 369 72 54 (Metro: Antón Martín). Open: Mon-Thurs, 11am-midnight; Fri-Sun, 11am-midnight (later if there is demand). Average cost per head: 15. New restaurant opening on Plaza de la Paja (next to Delic) this month (Metro: La Latina).*

**La Bio Tika**

You can't get much healthier than a vegetarian, macrobiotic restaurant that offers a menu based on an ancient yogic diet. That means not only no meat or fish, but no egg, lactose, garlic, onion or mushrooms, and the result is surprisingly full-flavoured thanks to the freshness of the ingredients and the clever use of herbs.

After a refreshing chilled melon soup, a side salad arrives in a blaze of colour: lettuce, grapes, green peppers, carrot, sultanas, peach, soya yogurt sauce and puréed beetroot sauce sprinkled with sesame and pumpkin seeds. It tastes as good as it looks. Top marks for the beetroot sauce (and I don't even like beetroot!).

The main dish is comprised of Mediterranean *pastel* of rice with tofu, lentils with carrot cream and steamed cauliflower. The carrot is sweet and creamy and goes well with the lentils and the *pastel* is tastier and firmer than other pastels I have eaten.

Dessert doesn't disappoint either — we chomp away on "fake" chocolate tart. It tastes like chocolate (not quite as sweet) and it looks like chocolate, but it's made from carob beans — much healthier. I feel energised already. *La Bio Tika, Amor de Dios, 3, tel: 91 429 07 80 (Metro: Antón Martín). Open: Mon-Sun, 1-4.30pm and 8-11.30pm. Menú del día: 9.40; evenings, weekends and fiestas: 11.50. Wider variety of dishes available at weekends. No smoking.*

**Vegaviana**

This is vegetarian heaven, with an option for non-veggies of free range chicken. I order Mexican corn *tortitas* with roasted vegetables and parmesan and my partner asks for spinach and carrot *croquetas* with salad. The portions are enormous — excellent value.

My *tortitas* are wafer-thin and crispy and the flavoursome vegetables include courgettes, red peppers, onion, aubergines and delicious sweet potato. The parmesan topping has been grilled until it is perfectly crunchy, and there's a tangy dark olive dressing on the side to contrast with the sweetness of the veggies. The *croquetas* are both creamy and crunchy; everything is delicious.

My main is the tofu and vegetable wok with soya sauce: firm-textured smoked tofu, sweetcorn, carrots, courgettes onion, red peppers, ginger, celery and a tangy soya sauce with sesame seeds. It's easy to forget that my stomach is groaning under the weight of my starter because this is so tasty I simply have to eat it all.

My partner tucks into a roasted aubergine topped with sweet and palatable tomato sauce, with a mouth-watering grilled parmesan crust. The taste is so good that even though he's full to bursting, he won't let them take his plate, and goes out to walk, returning 10 minutes later to determinedly finish the remains of his dinner.

Needless to say, we have no room for the probably delectable homemade desserts and opt for herbal tea instead. *Vegaviana, c/Pelayo, 35, tel: 91 308 03 81 (Metro: Chueca). Open: Tues-Thurs, 1.30-4pm and 9-11.30pm; Fri-Sat, 1.30-4pm and 9pm-midnight. Average cost per head: 15. Menú del día (choices available): 8.90. Menú de degustación for two: 17. No smoking.*



**Artemisa**

This is a homely restaurant with a warm decor and pleasant background music. My partner and I share *espinacas a la catalana* and *pate vegetal* for starters. The *pate* is tasty, thick and creamy and the spinach dish is complimented with tangy chopped apple, sweet sultanas and pine nuts, all mixed together in a creamy sauce.

The generous portions have us loosening our belts by the time the mains arrive: *sorprema de la casa* and *berejenas reina Africa*. *Sorprema* consists of two halves of sweet roasted red pepper, stuffed with mushrooms and vegetables and topped in a very strong Gouda cheese. The *berenjenas* are also roasted and stuffed with courgettes, pine nuts and cashews. The nutty flavour goes deliciously well with the aubergine: top marks for originality. Both come with a side serving of vegetable rice and a juicy slice of orange.

We're propping ourselves up on the table by the time dessert arrives, and yet we devour it in seconds; testament to how mouth-watering it is. The tiramisu is creamy, nutty and chocolaty without being over-rich and the cheesecake is also divine and topped with rich, tangy berries.

If you want to learn what to do with your vegetables to make them taste as good as they do at Artemisa, then you can sign up for one of their cookery courses. *Artemisa, Ventura de la Vega, 4, tel: 91 429 50 92 (Metro: Sevilla). Also at Tres Cruces, 4, tel: 91 521 87 21 (Metro: Sol). Open: Mon-Sun, 1.30-4pm and 9pm-midnight. Average cost per head: 25. Menú del día (changes daily. Never the same twice): 10.75. Menú de degustación for two: 23.95.*

**El Estragón**

What appeals to me most when I enter El Estragón is the cosy, candlelit ambiance and the chilled flamenco music: it's the perfect setting for a romantic dinner.

I order onion soup, which is light and tasty and topped with delicious semi-melted cheese. My partner goes for the green salad which is refreshingly different: lettuce, spinach, cashews, courgettes, green olives and feta cheese, dressed in light and creamy tartar sauce.

Next on the menu for me is *Crêpes a la Mouselina*. My dish arrives and I rename it "Crêpe Mountain": it's an enormous plate of three thick crêpes stuffed to bursting with mixed vegetables, quinoa and dried fruit, all smothered in a creamy, garlicky sauce. It has a unique and delicious flavour, but it's quite heavy and the mountain defeats me before I get to tackle the third crêpe.

My partner has *Pallarda*: two big, crunchy, homemade vegetable burgers covered in sesame seeds, served with a light and slightly spiced, sweet-and-sour sauce with chopped vegetables and potatoes. It's a delicious combination of textures and flavours and it's an extremely generous portion.

This is all washed down with a bottle of white Viña Sol and then we roll home feeling very contented. *El Estragón, Plaza de la Paja, 10, tel: 91 365 89 82 (Metro: La Latina). Open: Mon-Thurs, 1.30-4.30pm and 8pm-12.30am; Fri-Sun, 1.30-4.30pm and 8pm-1.30am. Average cost per head: 35. Menú del día: 19. Smoking permitted.*

www.guadalupe.com/estragonvegetariano

EL ESTRAGÓN  
Restaurante Vegetariano

WHO AREN'T VEGETARIANS  
SURPRISING TO THOSE

Plaza de la Paja, 10.  
Los Austrias area. Metro: La Latina.  
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