

The best of fine dining

Hawke's eye view

John Hawkesby

From memory, which is usually pretty good (thank you for asking) Stefanos was the first place we ate at when first coming to the island over a decade ago. Renting a house in Kiwi Street, readying ourselves for the builders to start, we spent every day planting 750 trees, cleaning the site of thistles and wild unruly blackberry bushes and trying not to disturb the horses, who at the time were blissfully grazing on our land.



Exciting times, everything was new, different and open for discovery.

After a big day on the land neither of us felt like heading to the kitchen and cooking. Easy option, stagger to whatever was open on a Monday night and let someone else do the cooking.

It was love at first sight. Funky, rustic, formica tables, composting long drops and the kind of convivial chaos that any half decent pizzeria should always have.

At first I thought the pizza toppings were a bit on the minimalist side; lacking a sense of adventure or any overture to the New Zealand expectation of what a pizza should consist of. I soon understood what they were on about and came quickly into line.

Wafer-thin crust, which I love, and those points of difference that set them apart from the Kiwi-ised pizzas we'd become accustomed to.

Shabby chic tables and chairs and a cavernous back room perfect for kids, and stoves on the floor, ideal for busy little fingers to

rearrange. Flapping canvas and plastic gave the place a camping ground feel and it didn't matter if the children tossed, dropped or spread the food all over the place.

Minimalist salads that had a level of Italian authenticity and always gelato, ice cream with chocolate sauce, and that great cholesterol-laden, thigh-slapping tiramisu. The specials board always had some creative additions and even if you felt you knew the menu backwards there was usually something to surprise you. The place could be noisy, lively and fairly compact but it all added to the sense of community. Above all else it was and still is great value for money.

A big plus for me especially was its BYO status. In those early days the wine was poured into small water glasses which was rather novel but for wine snobs (like myself) they sometimes did not do much for the wine, especially if you happen to have brought something half way decent from home.

I recall one occasion when I told my wife Joyce I was taking a very flash Italian red with considerable bottle age and would be taking my own wine glass. She was horrified and said she would allow me to go into the restaurant on my own and she would follow a discreet time after-



wards. She wanted no part of this pretentious nonsense. Needs be as needs must.

Imagine my great joy upon entering Stefanos to see a large group of winemakers – both local and from Hawkes Bay – all sitting together

with loads of wine and they too had brought their own glasses.

Vindication. The smug look of triumph on my face is possibly even still with me.

Needless to say a riotous night ensued and everyone was polite enough to take their own glasses home for self washing. A boon and great idea I would've thought for any restaurant to encourage. Maybe even extend it to plates and cutlery and really keep those overheads down.

Now, I do not have any connection with Stefanos, no shares in the business, no relative who's an owner or part-owner – they have simply taken a reasonable amount of money off me over the years.

What makes this place so special is how user-friendly it is for young families. It is, and has been for many years, a firm favourite with our grandchildren who like to eat at 5.30pm.

As we all crash through the door at 5.20 the kitchen know to automatically make lots of garlic mozzarella pizza bread and get it to the table as quickly as possible before the kids start eating the chairs.

Orders for round two are taken swiftly and the variations and deviations from the prescribed menu are accommodated with good grace. Josh wants just cheese and no tomato but doesn't mind the tomato base. Jackson doesn't like anything green on his pizza so forget the rocket or basil. Miller wants everything but nothing too hot. Alice will have whatever Josh is having – you get the picture.

Crayons and paper miraculously appear for the kids to alleviate their phenomenally short attention spans and the odd spilt drink is treated as just part of the evening by long suffering staff.

Stefanos may not rival the more up-market, very smart, other eating establishments the island currently boasts, but for

young kids and parents or grandparents wanting a relatively inexpensive fun night with lovely food, relaxed atmosphere and a sense of belonging, then this iconic Waiheke restaurant is the finest of fine dining. ■