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Puccini and prawns at a little outpost of Italy

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I WAS HAVING DINNER recently in the house of a mathematician friend and his wife. He writes books on extremely recondite areas of mathematics - books which he tells me can be understood by only about 45 people throughout the world. At this dinner party somebody said: "What nationality would you like to be if you were born afresh?" There was a short silence. Then a fellow guest replied "Italian", and there was immediate agreement up and down the table. Of course it would be wonderful to be Italian.

One of the pleasures of being Italian must be the cuisine, and this brings me to the subject of Sardi's, which is to be found in Edinburgh's Forrest Road. It is a very convenient place to have a meal if you have just visited the Royal Museum or if you have just been acquitted in the Sheriff Court opposite the Museum. If you have been convicted, of course, you may be dining elsewhere.

Forrest Road runs from the northern end of the pedestrian route that bisects the Meadows. If you walk along it you will see several other restaurants, a delicatessen, what appears to be an Australian pub, and, of course, that great Edinburgh howff, Sandy Bell's. This is where the widely lamented Hamish Henderson was to be seen from time to time and where he had been known to sing. As I write this I am listening to Dick Gaughan's haunting rendition of Henderson's 51st Highland Division's Farewell to Sicily.

Sardi's is directly opposite Sandy Bell's. I went there for lunch with my friend, Steven Neff. Dr Neff and I have lunch together regularly and talk about a whole range of subjects. He is currently writing a book on the American Civil War, a subject of which I have scant knowledge. Dr Neff is extremely thin. He can eat whatever he likes and not put on an ounce of weight. In this area, as in others, genes reveal the fundamental unfairness of life.

We were greeted warmly by the proprietrix of the restaurant, Tanya Gallo. Tanya is the only daughter of the late Mario Gallo. Mario, a very fine man, was born in the Casino area and came to Scotland at the age of eight. We have been so much enriched by that part of the Italian diaspora that came to Scottish shores, and the contribution that Italians have made to the hotel and restaurant trade in Scotland is immense. Mario Gallo and his wife ran the International Fish and Chicken bar in north Viewforth for many years, and are fondly remembered by many people who were attacked by pangs of hunger late at night as they wandered home along Gilmore Place.

Nine years ago Mario and his wife set up their daughter in Sardi's, and since then she has been running it with Ganni Gali. In typically Italian style, Tanya and Ganni work immensely hard, but this does not in any way diminish their cheerfulness. I visited this restaurant many times before I decided to review it, and I have never seen them look dispirited or make one feel anything but extremely welcome. This is true professionalism, but it is also an approach which seems utterly unforced. The owner and staff of this restaurant actually appear to like their customers, which makes visiting this restaurant an utter delight.

The ambience is all very Italian - there are pictures of Verdi and Puccini on the wall, and Italian opera unrolls quietly in the background.



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For the first course, Dr Neff chose smoked salmon parcels (£6.80), served with a subtle Marie rose sauce, while I chose squid (£12, served as a main) - fresh and not too rubbery. Then Dr Neff resorted to a fillet steak (£14.95), which he said was extremely tender and reminded him of the fine steaks his mother served back in Tennessee. I had prawns (£12) which were firm and fresh and served with lemon and garlic sauce on a fish-shaped dish. Such sauces as were provided for the various courses were just right: not too heavy and not too sweet (as so many sauces seem to be). Special mention must be made of the broccoli, which was beautifully cooked. Something was done to it which made it most unlike the slightly discouraged broccoli one is served in some places. There was no room for pudding, although such things are available.

This outpost of Italy will delight the Italophile. We ate the grand lunch, but there is a very affordable three-course lunch (£5.95), well within the price range of the lawyers who can often be seen sitting at these tables laughing over some human misfortune. Dinner is also served. One of the popular choices at lunchtime is the pizza. This is not the stodgy sponge that one finds in some places, but thin and delicious, with a good choice of toppings. If one drinks wine there is a relatively small choice of standard Italian wines, but prices are reasonable. All in all, it is very much what one would expect at a decent trattoria in Italy.

At the end, Dr Neff said to me: "That was really good." Those were his very words.

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