

Rocco, Ponsonby

By Simon Farrell-Green

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It seems remarkable that Rocco has been in its big white house on Ponsonby Road for eight years now. Not because it's past its use-by date – far from it – but because it is still one of the best places to eat on the Ponsonby Rd strip.

Its annoying front door situation aside – walk up the front steps, try the front door, realise it's not the front door, walk around the side to the sliding door that drops you into the bar, gawp, look for a waiter – it is one of the most quintessentially Auckland spaces around. It's villa-ish, with high ceilings, a polished concrete floor, lots of white, lots of mirrors. It has a big tented courtyard out the back, perfect for a long summer lunch.

Nearly a decade on, the food is as good as it ever was – broadly, Spanish with Mediterranean touches. You must banish thoughts of tapas and lashings of paprika. Instead, it's all the things Spanish food does well – lots of seafood, plenty of pork and excellent produce, simply treated. But the thing about Rocco is that they know when to hold back. Viz, a side salad of whitloof and pear with a mustard seed dressing that I would happily have eaten on its own, several times over.

On a recent Saturday night, the restaurant was pleasantly quiet. Maybe it's the recession, maybe it's because this place has always done well from the expense account crowd, or maybe it's just because people have flocked to the Ponsonby Road Bistro (owned by the same smart fellows) down the road, but the place didn't have the pleasantly raucous buzz it usually has.

We didn't care. We were after casserole. I must confess to a small obsession with Rocco's hearty casseroles and stews, served in big terracotta dishes. I'm not sure that I've ever eaten another main there. What more could you want? Sometimes they're rich and full of seafood and paprika, sometimes it might be a squid-ink wonder, sometimes beans, sometimes not. They're a triumph of cooking and patience.

The rest of the menu is deft. It has a big, tapas-style entree section, which is welcome – in fact, given the generous portion sizes, you could happily make up dinner from this and come out without spending much at all. It has a few pastas and a few, seasonal, well-chosen mains: casseroles, eye fillet, pork belly, market fish. It's good value: there's not much above \$30.

We loved a starter of crispy fried calamari: the squid was tender and the batter was crispy and salty. But it was the agro dolce beetroot starter that really stood out. Agro dolce is, literally, sweet and



Rocco's agro dolce: goats' curd, marinated walnuts, pickled beets. Photo / Babiche Martens

sour: this was pickled beets, matched with a tart, zingy goats' curd and marinated walnuts. It was perfectly balanced, earthy and sweet and tart – good ingredients, simply prepared, beautifully plated.

Thrillingly, there were two casseroles on the menu: a Moorish lamb casserole and a seafood cazuela, which is best thought of as a paella with more sauce and big fat gigante beans rather than rice. I insisted that we order both.

This was an excellent decision. The lamb was superb, slow cooked to perfection, topped with a mint and pea salsa and thinly sliced roast potatoes. So often a dish like this can become dominated by one note: this was both subtle and hearty. It was, again, balanced and nuanced and, most importantly, fragrant. Then there was cazuela, which was everything you could want a nice big terracotta dish of beans, chorizo, seafood and spicy tomatoes to be.

For dessert, a torta Santiago, which was no less accomplished. Torta Santiago is a fine thing: it's an almond cake, and it came with quince syrup. It was powerfully sweet, but not overwhelmingly so. Its crust was nicely biscuity.

Service was brisk, friendly and accomplished. At least, until the end of the meal, when they displayed that peculiarly Auckland habit of ignoring anyone who has ordered dessert or might just possibly like to pay their bill now. By the time you've scoffed your way through a few hours and \$150 of food and wine, you're ready to leave, not flag down a waiter in the vain hope of giving them some money.

But I forgive them. Because next time I go, I won't be reviewing. I will wave the menu aside and order casserole, whatever it is. I will eat it and I will be replete.

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