

Food, drink and all that jazz

The Jazz Café at the Madejski Stadium in Reading offers good food and upbeat music in a relaxed and informal atmosphere. Carol Evans enjoys the dining experience

I LOVE good food, upbeat music and I live near Reading. So why hadn't anybody told me about the Jazz Café at the Madejski Stadium?

Anyway, I know about it now and I can honestly say I can thoroughly recommend it for a great night out.

The atmosphere is relaxed and informal, the food is excellent, the service friendly and attentive, but not ingratiating – and the music is pretty damn good too.

As night spots go, this is one of the most welcoming I have been to. Management really do care about their guests and go to great lengths to make them feel at home, especially first time visitors like ourselves.

The Jazz Café is located on the first floor of the Stadium complex in Shooters Way. It is stylish and contemporary, with subdued lighting and a deep blue ceiling punctuated by huge silvery air ducts and glitter balls. Monochrome films of early America and jazz greats play on a large screen at one end of the room enhancing the air of eager anticipation of the evening's gig.

Aimed at the over-25s with a smart-casual dress code that rules out trainers, jeans and t-shirts, the Jazz Café has defined itself as the 'in' place for eating out as a group or for an intimate dinner à deux.

Happily, too, it is totally non-ageist. Baby boomers, brought up with beat music but intimidated by today's soulless, techno night clubs, won't appear like spectres at the feast, intruding on their youngsters' playtimes. No-one feels out of place here.

And the food – chef Craig Morton is a master in his kitchen where he creates innovative menus which he describes as 'classic English with a continental twist'. From the choice of four starters that included soup, red mullet on fruity chutney with red pesto and an open walnut bread sandwich of beetroot and tzatziki, we chose a chicken liver paté served with mango compôte on Melba toast: a tantalising combination if ever there was.

After a refreshingly sharp lime sorbet, it was on to the main course. I went for pork fillet wrapped in spinach and Parma ham on a leek and butter bean fricassée. Surrounded by sauce verde and topped with a swirling strip of pickled cucumber, this was a delicious and clever blend of flavours.

A tangy tyrolean sauce and balsamic dressing proved to be an inspired accompaniment to my husband's grilled halibut topped with glazed



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potato scales. Both dishes were served with a plentiful supply of vegetables that included mangetout, courgettes, French beans and, my favourite, absolutely divine dauphinoise potatoes.

The rest of the menu was equally imaginative: chicken breasts stuffed with mascarpone, sun-dried tomatoes and basil with chive risotto and white wine, saffron and coriander sauce, fillet steak with cherry tomato compôte and a beef Wellington special.

Vegetarians could have tomato fettuccine pasta with new potatoes and artichoke hearts tossed in a white wine sauce or onion and goat's cheese tart with a radicchio and rocket salad.

The wine list is well selected and doesn't cost the earth. Our bottle of Italian house red was excellent value at £12.50.

And so to dessert: Banoffi pie with whipped cream, a blast from the past with Black Forest gâteau, homemade ice cream or cheese and biscuits? In the end I opted for raspberry and Tia Maria crème brûlée and did not regret my choice.

The Jazz Café started life in nearby Henley-on-Thames where it became a cult late night venue during its five-year stay.

Now in its fourth year at the Mad Stad (as we Reading folk call the home of Reading Football Club), it is quietly enhancing the

reputation it built up in Henley. People come from all over Berkshire and further afield. A stone's throw from Junction 11 of the M4, it attracts punters from London, Bristol, Swindon and elsewhere.

Live music includes jazz, soul, funk and blues from professional artistes and begins at around 9.30pm – giving you plenty of time to start your meal, linger over cocktails or coffee and then dance until the small hours. Once booked, the table is yours until closing time at 2am.

On our visit, the popular 12-piece Blunter Brothers band soon had everybody dancing. It has been known for international stars, Courtney Pine for one, to make an appearance.

I enjoyed my first visit to the Jazz Café but will I go again? Yes, most certainly. Now I've found it, just try keeping me away.

Live entertainment takes place every Friday and Saturday evening. Two courses from the set menu cost £26.50 on Fridays and £31.50 on Saturdays.

Price includes admission (normally £5 or £10 for non diners). There's plenty of parking and an option to leave the car overnight for collection by 11am next day.

Further details from www.thejazzcafe.co.uk or tel: 01189 681 442.