

The gypsy tap

AN old gypsy invitation to break bread goes like this: "May I bring shame and disaster upon all my family if you do not share my meal with me." Well, since Una and Stefan Armentano opened in Fremantle just seven weeks ago, hordes of customers have been valiantly swilling half-litres of red wine and pigging out on polpetta, all with the magnanimous aim of preventing any misfortune befalling the Armentano family.

The gusto with which punters are embracing this cheap and cheerful new kid on the block probably has more to do with the standard of food and the bounteous warmth shown by the energetic and vibrant couple, who have breathed life into this old cafe.

Yes, they are gypsies – in a nomadic, wandering, free-spirited lifestyle sort of way.

Their carefree approach is reflected in the decor – a couch to flop on here, a bar stool to perch on there. There's mismatched crockery, colourful artwork and live music provided by violins and a piano accordion.

And the patrons are just as colourful. I swear I saw one woman wandering the restaurant in a long skirt made of colourful scarves.

But enough of the ambience. Let's get to the food – a subject you warm to immediately once you're sitting down with a tumbler of red, which, in keeping with the keep-it-simple philosophy, is measured by the litre or glass and comes in two varieties: red or white.

It's all Brown Brothers and the red we had was a bloody good drop.

The food, at \$6 a dish, is just as easy to choose, though there

are 30 dishes to choose from, all derived from the Armentanos' stopovers through life. You'll be hard pushed to stop at just three each. And each is delivered with a hunk of continental bread, courtesy of Stefan's French heritage, which decrees it heresy to serve a meal without bread.

We started at No. 6 – pickled Fremantle sardines – and kept going via paprika-marinated octopus, char-grilled chorizo sausage, gorgonzola bruschetta, char-grilled cut of lamb and martinated mushrooms until we stopped at No. 30 gnocchi napoli.

On turning the page we discovered a tantalising array of desserts so pushed on regardless.

Apple tarte (dry but delectable) poached pear in red wine (delicious) and raspberry ice cream (divine) were certainly worth the effort.

The lot came to about \$80 for three, which was about a third of what you would pay at other more sophisticated tapas venues in Perth. But where other tapas are sleek, refined and intricately prepared these are rustic, down-home and honest, the fare you would get in a southern European village bar.

The gorgonzola bruschetta was unanimously voted our hero and is, apparently, often requested for breakfast.

It is a deliciously oozing mixture of best-quality gorgonzola (from Blue Cow) laced with evoo and garlic, spread over the bread, then char grilled.

The flavour of charcoal from the open grill comes through in a lot of the food, served here from the small kitchen where Stefan does most of the work.

It certainly came through in the lamb and chorizo sausage. And, I'm told, the eggplant done this way is to die for.

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