



REVIEW CATHERINE CLEARY

Eat to the veggie beat

We don't eat vegetables to be virtuous, and Sweet Beat Cafe in Sligo delivers sinful foodie kicks



It's not easy being a newly minted vegetarian with your 10-year-old brother keeping a precise count of your meat-free days. So I'm taking my niece to Sweet Beat in Sligo town along with her mother (a lapsed vegetarian) and grandmother.

Maire Kearney, a once teenage vegetarian now in her 40s, took square aim at Irish restaurants recently in our food podcast *All You Can Eat*. It wasn't just a cry from the heart of a neglected veggie. Chefs who view the "vegetarian option" as an afterthought are missing the point. Meat-free has expanded beyond a niche minority of lentil-lovers who love brown sludge and knit their own bicycles.

There's a whole growing segment of veg-curious eaters: people who eat meat but also love vegetables. We are not eating veggie to be virtuous. We expect the same food kicks from a plate of greens, pinks, purples and pulses as we might get from a plate of steak. So another desultory beet and goats cheese combo doesn't cut the mustard.

Sweet Beat sits on the corner of Kempton Parade and Bridge Street beside the swollen brown Garavogue river. It has nifty graphics over the door of stencilled vegetables with love hearts cut out of their middles. It is doing something that's harder to find in the Dublin versions of these kinds of cafes.

You are not greeted with a chest fridge of pre-prepped plate fillers. No matter how many pomegranate seeds are sprinkled over things in these urban cafes, I'm increasingly struck with

the sinking feeling that I've just stepped into an overpriced kale-centred sandwich bar. Here there's a kitchen where people are making things. Things like turmeric butter and kale pesto, and a chili hummus that has my sister-in-law doing a near-CSI spectrum analysis on a take-home tub in an effort to recreate it a few days later.

We sit upstairs in a simple white-painted room with four large windows filling the place with light and painted tin cans filled with feathery fresh wild and garden flowers. We're about to rearrange some of the Ikea tables to make a group of four when a man at a table by the window offers us his. It's that kind of friendly place.

We start with smoothies. A turmeric one is a little muted, tasting more of coconut and banana than the ginger and turmeric in its ingredients list. My

"greens" (now drink your greens) – which sounds more virtuous than delicious – is the surprising star. It's a frothy mix of kale, almond, spinach, hemp and spirulina with honey, almond and banana to take it further out of the veg patch. Raw cacao nibs are sprinkled on top and left to be spooned out of the glass at the end.

There's a hearty plate of their three salads, a mound of colourful, imaginative food into which craft and heart has been put. Butterbeans have been yellowed by rubbing up against saffron-roasted butternut squash. Nuggets of bulgar look like red rice thanks to the beet chunks chopped alongside them, with whole spelt grains that look like barley and roasted walnuts for a warm crunchy finish.

There's some of that magic hummus and squidgy ripe avocado topped off with sweetly pickled cucumber. There's a doorstop-thick sweet potato falafel burger, warm and nutty and laced through with sesame seeds. A vegetarian lasagne manages to be tasty rather than sludgy, with courgettes, aubergine and mushrooms providing the meaty layer. Hummus toast is another good showcase for the show-stopping spicy orange paste.

We finish with treats: a muffin that comes in the kind of brown paper wrapper that usually gets filled with cloying stodge. Here it's like brilliant banana bread with the kind of soft springiness that comes with cake that has just come out of the oven. Bilberries are baked into a soft oat square and the best is a chocolate brownie. It's nothing like a

SECOND HELPING

Dinner for 12 can be a challenge but the Waterfront House in Enniscrone, Co Sligo, did a lovely job for a recent family gathering. I had juicy mussels in a spoonable garlic and white wine sauce with a polenta and roasted vegetable main. Others enjoyed spanking fresh fish battered with chips, roast lamb, chicken and pasta dishes. There was a great early bird deal of €19.50 for two courses and no charge for the spectacular view out over Killala Bay to the ever-changing drama of Atlantic-blown clouds beyond.

Waterfront House Wine Bar and Restaurant, Cliff Road, Enniscrone, Co Sligo; 096-37120

brownie in texture, which can be anything from sawdust to dribbly ooze. The base is walnut and dates topped with a fudgy ganache. It's a chewy, mouth-filling delight.

Good Wall and Keogh teas – camomile and lemon and ginger with lemon-grass shards in the pot – finish off.

We all like this place – meat-eaters, once-veggies and new vegetarian too. I'm not going to patronise sophisticated Sligo by saying how great it is to see somewhere like this a long way from hipster city streets. But when food this good for you tastes this good we are in the sweet spot.

Lunch for four with smoothies and teas came to €67.85

8/10

Sweet Beat Cafe, Bridge St, Sligo, Co Sligo; Tel: 071-913879

Facilities: Upstairs, fine

Music: What we used to call World Music

Food provenance: None

Wheelchair access: No

Vegetarian options: The only option

THE VERDICT: A really impressive addition to Sligo's food scene