

Saf's dining room is just as elegant as the food served there.



Savoring Saf



High-end cuisine, raw food, and Americans collide in London's simple, authentic eatery. *By Alex Bourke*

THE FINANCIAL SQUARE MILE HAS A GOURMET vegan restaurant nestled amongst the cocktail bars and clubs of trendy Shoreditch, London's equivalent of the East Village. Saf's menu is 75-percent raw, but there are warming cooked dishes too, and more than 100 organic and biodynamic wines and cocktails.

Entering through the picture windows, you notice there is a bit of a chic edge to the décor, with abstract art hanging floor to ceiling, solid black tables, spot lighting, and long orange lanterns. The place is warm and welcoming and the music is refreshingly soft and unintrusive, accompanied by the occasional hum of the juicer. Unlike a typical raw temple, a stainless steel bar runs half the length of the room. This swish restaurant is packed with mostly young people despite the recession—someone must really know what they're about.

Those someones are Americans Chad Sarno and Joe McCanta, who met at Counter vegan bistro, in New York City's East Village. McCanta was the bartender who created an organic cocktail list, and Sarno served as a consultant who helped increase the menu's raw quotient. Sarno has also been a private chef to celebs like Woody Harrelson and Charlize Theron, and opened Roxanne's vegan restaurant in the San Francisco Bay Area. McCanta, who is glowingly healthy and looks ridiculously youthful to be running a high-end restaurant, grew up around

wine in California, worked in a wine shop in Boston, and moved to New York to play in a band. The third maestro is Turkish spa owner Ersin Pamuksüzer, who brought in Sarno and McCanta to set up the first Saf restaurants in Istanbul and Munich before opening up in London in 2008.

Enticing Extras

If one-of-a-kind organic cocktails and sensational food weren't enough, Saf gives patrons plenty of reasons to stop in and rub elbows with swank Shoreditch locals.

◆◆◆ **Go with the Flow** Stop in for energizing Vinyasa flow yoga at Saf's wellness studio, fit for yogis of all levels. Recharge and refresh after your practice with special discounts on invigorating detox juices and lunch.

◆◆◆ **Reinventing the Roast** Akin to the US fascination with brunch, Londoners look forward to a Sunday Roast, and Saf sports the city's top vegetarian roast dinner. Join fellow diners on the quiet patio and enjoy a leisurely, satisfying Sunday meal.

Right from the get-go they wanted to appeal to everyone, not just vegans and raw foodists. The food is so elegantly lush that you wouldn't know it's raw, and not everything is. As a result, the restaurant is filled with typical Shoreditch folk—designers, architects, business people, modelesque types. A-list patrons include Woody Harrelson, Alicia Silverstone, Heather Mills, and Whole Foods Market CEO John Mackey. American Poorva Joshipura from PETA's London office says, "I take friends to Saf on birthdays and other occasions and it's a great place to take a special someone on a date or to show your meat-eating friends how unique and delicious vegan dishes can be."

The fourth veggie master in the London team is Kate Konderak, the front-of-house manager. Konderak offers suggestions from the five 3-course lunch menus starting from \$17, or the fast option is a raw burger for \$14. Menu 2 for \$25 is the most popular, and includes a gazpacho soup, Thai green curry, and ice cream, but I'm tempted by menu 3 at \$34, starting with Saf's legendary raw beetroot ravioli made with cashew-herb ricotta. Friends warned this dish is divinely soft and tangy, but no way was I expecting the first bite's effect, when my eyes closed and jaws went into what can only be called rawgasm. After years of failing to understand intellectually, now I am at one with why rawies are brimful of smiles. And

Photos courtesy of Saf

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we're nowhere near dessert.

Dinner starters are around \$10, mains \$20 to \$25. A starter selection for two people for \$28 contains the beetroot ravioli, vegetable maki, cashew cheese, or hummus with flax crackers. Raw mains include lasagna, tacos, and eggplant Pad Thai with almond sauce. Cooked foodies can enjoy tofu-and-mushroom dumplings or a Saf bowl of teriyaki tofu, mushroom risotto, and tamarind salad. The signature raw "cheeses" are made daily and served with pesto, olives, sprouted raw rye bread, and marmalade. Yes, marmalade. This is England, though it feels very like lower Manhattan.

If it's your anniversary or last night in London, splurge on Sarmo's \$80 7-course banquet. Add \$40 for optional wine pairing. If there are several of you, call ahead to nail a place at the chef's table overlooking the open kitchen. Tonight's feast includes beetroot ravioli (what else?), vegetable maki, shiitake dumplings, sage pesto *au poivre* with cashew cheese, spicy coconut noodle laksa soup, and the big finish, chocolate ganache tart with spiced rum pear compote, complete with a second When-Harry-Met-Sally moment.

The huge wine list starts at \$30 for a bottle, but my crew loved Saf's botanical cocktails, using herbs from the garden out back where you can enjoy a drink on warm nights. Try a mojito for \$14 with chai-infused organic white rum. I choose an \$8 non-alcoholic vegetable cocktail which has a rousing zing from mint that minutes ago was looking forward to a long life in a tub out back. You can also drink filtered ionized water all night for a flat cover charge of \$1.50.

My friends and I love it, and those on artists' incomes look forward eagerly to being treated by yuppie friends and generous parents. Gordon Ramsay has nothing to teach Saf, but Saf might have a few things to teach him. Five stars for service and food. And let's not forget those two rawgasms. **VN**

Alex Bourke is the founder of *Vegetarian Guides* and editor of *vegan guidebooks to London, Britain, and Europe* (vegetarianguides.co.uk).

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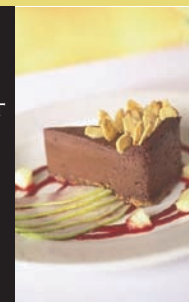
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