

Visible Pantry Line

The bottom line, that is – at a crunch-defying £22 for three courses, the Modern Pantry is a paean to value and flair. By **EUGENE COSTELLO**

IN A COBBLED square of handsome Georgian merchants' townhouses in Clerkenwell (that is, the townhouses are handsome, not the Georgian merchants, as far as I know) is a modern gem. In the Modern Pantry young chef-proprietor Anna Hansen has wrought a minor miracle – a deli/table commune café/fine-dining restaurant that champions the seasonal and trumpets the dazzlingly eclectic, while competing on price with pizzeria chains.

We went on a Sunday when you can choose any three courses for just £22. Downstairs, the café was doing brisker business than trackside on Derby Day, though without the 'tic-tac' gestures of on-course bookies. No secret language here – just simplicity, ranging from the crisp and concise menu to the refreshingly uncluttered appearance of both the café and the dining rooms upstairs, all clean lines and white tables. Like a students' union dining room at a particularly avant-garde institute of cutting-edge design in, say, Stockholm or Stuttgart.

And so to the food. After an especially well-mixed Bloody Mary to take the edge off the day, it was time to get down to business. We cheated by getting a 'tasting menu' of starters – smaller portions, but more of them. Sweetcorn, date and coriander fritters with green pepper relish and Greek yoghurt sounded like a playful mix of tastes but made a beautifully composed – and balanced – dish that was reminiscent of a good bhaji with raita, Mediterranean-style. Crab rarebit was workmanlike, but in honesty it is hard to get overly excited about anything on toast.

But if I could relive the Krupuk quail eggs every Sunday, my God, I would never complain about a hangover again. Like mini Malaysian Scotch eggs, these came in tempura batter with enough crunch to lift the dish from the whimsical *amuse bouche* I'd expected, krupuk being a type of prawn cracker to something altogether



 **ROOM WITH A VIEW:** The minimalist dining room upstairs at the Modern Pantry

more substantial, with the just-runny quail eggs proving the whole beautifully worked filigree to be a triumph of timing as well as taste, all served with a lime chilli dip.

Talking of which, the mains list poses something of a dilemma. With a traditional roast (rosemary-and-garlic leg of lamb, the day we visited) and all the trimmings (roast carrots, parsnips and potatoes and Yorkshire pud) *might* seem like a shoo-in, what with the whole Sunday morning hangover, Bloody Mary thang going on. But, I urge you, throw caution to the wind and be adventurous.

For a wild explosion of tastes, choose the Asian-inspired smorgasbord of savouries.

“The Modern Pantry is a deli-come table commune-café-come fine-dining restaurant that champions the seasonal and trumpets the dazzlingly eclectic”

Cavalo nero, a black kale-like cabbage from Tuscany, with a gratin that makes it comfort food to die for. Sweet potato and amaranth samosas were squaring up to dumplings of hijiki and ricotta, and quinoa and liquorice for a punch-up as to who could be King Cavalo's chief counsel at the Court of Comfort. For a knock-out blow, throw in some pickled beetroot and edamame beans, Japanese soybeans that normally buddy up with sushi or sashimi, and Hansen's work here is done. *Sayonara, arigato*, job done.

But if you want something a little more, well, western, with a main and veg, as well as the afore-mentioned roasts, there is a wonderful monkfish dish. Paired with a good light red – the monkfish is meaty enough to do this – you'll be laughing in the face of those who tell you that fish is a light dish, not a winter warmer. Charlatans.... Served on a squared tower of layers of beetroot with an anchovy gratin and rainbow chard, the only thing light about this is the bill. My monkfish came with a just a little too much olive oil – a moderate shower, rather than a drizzle – but that is possibly going out of my way to find fault.

For dessert – if you have space – try the Hokey Pokey afogato. Hokey Pokey ice cream is a home-made delight, a confection of creamy vanilla around a heart that is a miniature washboard of crunchy honeycomb. To die for. Afogato? That means it comes floating as an island of sweetness in a bitter sea of espresso, the two counterpointing each other as effectively as two old musical hall pros, and infinitely more exquisitely.

As we put on our coats and shuffled off into the night for a digestif at nearby Exmouth Market, I glanced back at the Modern Pantry. It stood like a twinkling, well-lit ocean liner bestriding the waves in luxury and comfort. We'll be going back for another (modestly priced) cruise soon. **H** From £35pb inc wine. 47-48 St John's Square, EC1; 020 7553 9210; themodernpantry.co.uk