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Why I will return to Mambo Italia

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Inside Mambo Italia restaurant. It's in a great location; when the sun is shining you can sit out under umbrellas on the rooftop terrace, and look out to the serene whites and greens of the Jaffreys Mosque. PHOTO| FILE| NATION MEDIA GROUP

In Summary

- All the materials are local: from the white coral slate lining the walls, the solid white cypress tables and chairs, the polished pine of the kitchen counter
- If you want to imagine you are sunning yourself at the Coast, you can go for the Swahili Beach: coconut curry sauce, mozzarella cheese, prawns, calamari, roasted garlic, red onions and coriander

- I had lunch there again, with a colleague. “I loved this place as soon as I walked in,” he said

When I wrote about the Lavington Curve a few weeks ago, I mentioned the Mambo Italia restaurant, perched up on the top floor of the white mall at the corner of James Gichuru Road and El Milo Drive.

I’ve been back there more than a few times since then. And the Mambo Italia deserves more than a mention.

It’s less than a five minutes’ walk from my office – but the reason I like the place is to do with more than proximity.

For one thing, it’s a great location; when the sun is shining you can sit out under umbrellas on the rooftop terrace, and look out to the serene whites and greens of the Jaffreys Mosque – or look down to the traffic moving along the now busy link between Waiyaki Way and Gitanga Road.

And at night there is the play of lights across the Lavington estates.

LOCAL MATERIALS

Inside, the decor is very clever: a happy mix of rustic charm and factory bric-a-brac.

All the materials are local: from the white coral slate lining the walls, the solid white cypress tables and chairs, the polished pine of the kitchen counter, the plywood veneers of old packing cases, the brown painted mabati of the ceiling lights, and the pastel colours of the pillars. An odd mix, you might think – but it works.

And then, of course, there is the food. That’s where the Italian connection comes in. The specialities are the pizzas. They are thin-crust and stone-baked.

The regular size is 25cm and the large is 34cm. The choices are too many to list here. But let me give you a few examples.

For meat lovers, there’s the Carnivore: tomato sauce, mozzarella cheese, beef, chicken, ham, spicy salami, bacon and garlic.

ITALIAN CHEESES

If you want to imagine you are sunning yourself at the Coast, you can go for the Swahili Beach: coconut curry sauce, mozzarella cheese, prawns, calamari, roasted garlic, red onions and coriander.

I'm very fond of cheese, and so far my favourite is a very tangy Quattro Formaggi: tomato sauce, mozzarella, gorgonzola, taleggio, and grana padano cheeses.

A nice touch: the menu (the revised one, starting from the beginning of October) has a brief guide to Italian cheeses.

Or you can create your own pizza by choosing a sauce (from extra virgin olive oil, tomato sauce, basil pesto or coconut curry), adding extra cheese, and choosing toppings (vegetables or meat and fish).

The prices are very reasonable, I think – from Sh600 for the regular size and Sh1,100 for the large size.

PASTA DISHES

As you would expect from an Italian place, there is a range of pasta dishes, including Chicken Pesto (penne, grilled chicken, basil pesto, bocconcini mozzarella, and cherry tomatoes) and Carbonara (penne, with crispy bacon tossed with egg, cream and pecorino cheese).

After mid-day you can choose from “small plates”, including grilled artichokes, salmon skewers and marinated olives.

The four main courses range across fillet steak (grilled to your liking), bread-crumbed chicken (stuffed with pesto and mozzarella), grilled chicken breasts (served with a parsley, garlic and anchovy sauce), and Mac n Cheese (pasta in a rich cheddar and taleggio sauce).

Again, as you would expect from an Italian place, the gelatos, the ice creams and sorbets, are delicious – piquantly so, too, when served with a sling of espresso coffee.

“So what’s with all this Italian thing, then?” I asked Anne Njoroge, the general manager. (It’s a nice name, isn’t it – Mambo Italia?).

“Where’s the Italian in all this?”

“There isn’t one,” she said with a chuckle. “It’s all from Nish’s head!”

FEEL FOR AMBIANCE

Which was quite correct, as I found out when I had a good chat with Nish Shah, the young owner.

“I just like Italian food,” he said.

He also has a feel for ambiance – whether Italian or not.

“I want this place to be casual and comfortable,” he said.

And I reckon the comfort is about the customers’ pockets as well as the restaurant chairs. He used the term “gourmet pizzas”.

There’s the interesting contrast – though not a contradiction. True, the Mambo Italia is somewhere between a fine dining restaurant and a snack bar.

“You have come back quite a few times now,” he said. “You have come here for lunches – and sometimes you come with friends in the evenings.

You wouldn’t be doing that if this was an expensive fine dining place would you? And that’s what we are trying to achieve – a place that’s casual and comfortable!”

Something else, too. Nish’s place has style – a contemporary style.

I had lunch there again, with a colleague. “I loved this place as soon as I walked in,” he said.

He is sure to be another who will be going back.