



The Phoenix Cafe (Fionn Uisce)

Ashtown Castle
The Visitor's Centre
The Phoenix Park
Dublin 8
Tel 01-6770090

ROSS GOLDEN BANNON

Hidden away next to the Phoenix Park Visitors Centre is the Phoenix Cafe, set in a modern building but sympathetic to its lush green surroundings. Its Irish name, Fionn Uisce, is emblazoned on the exterior, although all the staff call it the Phoenix Cafe.

The downstairs area has about eight tables and stairs lead up to a second floor with a double height room and a giant window looking out at the ancient Ashtown Castle. Banquettes line the walls and simple chairs and tables fill the rest of the space. It occasionally feels like a parish hall – albeit a stylish one – and on warmer days you can sit in the sun trap courtyard.

Following a long run on a Saturday morning through the glories of the Phoenix Park, a few of us members of a running club, the Dublin Frontrunners, head straight for this cafe where friendly staff offer a wide range of quiches, soups and a daily hot special.

On my recent visit this was a chilli chicken dish with green rice, coloured with basil, or blackened salmon with a choice of three salads (€9.50 per dish).

The vast majority of the food is organically sourced and all the meat is Irish. From a generous choice of four quiches, I had the aubergine with feta cheese (€8.50). It comes with a choice of three salads of such hearty portions that I am rarely able to clear my plate.

My quiche was light and creamy, but remained firm en-



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TONY O'SHEA

Park cafe is a frontrunner

ough to put a knife through and the fresh, slightly flaky pastry contrasted beautifully with the quiche.

There is nearly always a new salad to choose from, but generally there is a choice of six such as carrot with pumpkin and black onion seed, celery and apple with hunks of cheese and a light dressing, dinky florets of broccoli and cauliflower with a creamy sauce as well as leaf salads and potato salads.

The grated carrot was lifted from the ordinary by the flavoursome seeds and a dash of strong vinaigrette dressing which staff offer separately. The celery and apple is some-

thing of a simple classic; it would be difficult to mask poor ingredients here and the quality and freshness is clearly evident.

I ate here on St Patrick's Day and we Frontrunners returned again for more on the Bank Holiday Monday after another run in the crisp, clear park air.

On that occasion I had the lasagne, which is something of an old staple for cafes. Sadly, many lasagnes taste of old staples, but not here. This was a rich combination of strong beef, creamy sauce and upstanding pasta (€9.50).

The soup (€4.50) is always vegetarian and contains no

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flour. On my visit it was a delicious roasted aubergine and butternut squash served with homemade brown bread.

My frighteningly fit, size zero running mates continue with their ambitions to be refused on the catwalks of Madrid, but I am resigned to a body mass index (BMI) in the mid 20s. That helpful extra poundage gives me the heft to push them aside at the finish line of marathons, so I always order dessert.

For an extra digit on your BMI you could try the superb homemade cakes and tarts. I had a square cake slice with a crumbly pastry, jam and coco-

nut filling which was delightfully light. I couldn't resist a nibble of their hummingbird cake made with pineapple and a lemon cream cheese frosting.

Also on offer are carrot cakes and, on my visit, a superb chocolate and beetroot cake with sinfully dark chocolate and moist walnuts (all €2.80 each). There is also a flourless chocolate cake which coeliacs can eat, but you don't have to be a coeliac to enjoy it.

A fellow Frontrunner and owner of an 07 sports Jaguar complained bitterly about the €2.80 cost of the large cappuccino. Perhaps a more modest car would make coffees more

affordable?

Ordinarily I get a snapshot of a restaurant – a one visit chance, just like a regular customer. So, the Phoenix Cafe is different as I visited it nearly every Saturday for a year.

Most restaurants don't get that level of scrutiny. (They do not know my identity, but then again I do look scary in running shorts). The extraordinary thing is that in all that time – bar one hard potato in a salad about six months ago – the food has been consistently good. Some of the Frontrunners complain that the prices are a bit high (though delicious scones with homemade jam

cost only €2.50). It is probably priced marginally above regular cafes, but these prices are reflected in the high standard and sourcing of the ingredients which, I believe, are worth supporting.

I paid €13.10 for a quiche with three salads, a pot of tea and a cake. The Phoenix Cafe's plans to get a wine licence could well change the amounts spent, but for the time being this place is one of the frontrunners of cafe food today.

The Phoenix Cafe serves lunch only from 9.30am-4.30pm, and will open until 5.30 when the evenings get brighter.