**Restaurant Elis: ‘It was only fine, it wasn’t awful’ – review**

A menu of Brazilian and Italian dishes had to be memorable. It was – but not for the right reasons

**Restaurant Elis, Town Hall Hotel, 8 Patriot Square, London E2 9NF (020 7871 0460;**[**restaurantelis.co.uk**](https://www.restaurantelis.co.uk/)**). Small plates £8-£13, large plates £16-£38, desserts £7-£10, wines from £30**

It’s true that dinner didn’t get off to a great start. There were the three times I had to explain that no, I wasn’t eating by myself, I was just the first to arrive and could you please stop trying to clear away my companion’s cutlery. He was going to need it. There were the two offers of cocktails and the two offers to explain the menu, a briefing few people enjoy the first time, let alone the second. But let’s put all that down to communication issues that can be ironed out.

The bigger problem was this. After months of terrific meals all over the UK at fair prices where nobody tried to explain the menu to me even once, I returned to London and had a relaxed dinner, which including the second cheapest bottle of wine, cost £110 a head. And it was only fine. It wasn’t awful. There were a couple of very nice dishes, a few that passed by without distracting from the conversation, and a couple that disappointed. Followed by the sort of bill I associate with memories made, with culinary wit and with all-round fabulousness.

Afterwards, as I stomped down the steps of the architecturally splendid Bethnal Green Town Hall Hotel in east London, home to the newly opened Restaurant Elis, I felt I had become one of the very people who criticise these reviews with a righteous, burning anger. £110 a head? In the midst of a cost-of-living crisis? How bloody dare you? I know the arguments: restaurants are nobody’s idea of a necessity, but then neither are tickets for Premiership football matches or West End shows or new iPads or horizon-expanding holidays. And yet we dedicate acres of space to those.

In economically bleak times, there are still lots of people who can afford the nice stuff. Plus, we can hold the two thoughts in our heads at the same time: that people are struggling horribly and yes, that sounds like a good way to spend the money I am lucky enough to have. Just a few months ago I argued that forgoing restaurants when you could afford them was a way deeper into recession, not out of it. But really, it does have to be worth it.

Anyway, let’s get into the detail. Elis is the second restaurant from Brazilian-born chef [Rafael Cagali](https://www.instagram.com/rafacagali/?hl=en), who has the two-Michelin-star [Da Terra](https://www.daterra.co.uk/about/) on the other side of the hard-to-navigate town hall. His food draws deeply on his Brazilian and Italian heritage. This is meant to be the laid-back iteration compared to the bells and whistles of Da Terra, where the tasting menu is £215 a head. Like his mother’s first jazz bar in São Paulo, it is named after Brazilian singer [Elis Regina](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FI1b9RK10JI). Hence the square box of a corner room, with its dangly lights and half-wood panelling, all designed to mirror the sturdy fittings of the building in which it sits, echoes to the strains of old-school bossa.

The menu doesn’t need much explaining. It’s divided into small plates and big plates, all of which are meant to be shared. The bread selection for £8 is workmanlike, though it comes with a nice cultured butter and a small bowl of stringy [stracciatella](https://www.theguardian.com/food/2020/mar/23/egg-drop-soup-rachel-roddy-stracciatella-recipe), which lubricates the slightly dry focaccia well. [Porchetta](https://www.theguardian.com/food/2022/sep/21/how-to-make-porchetta-recipe-felicity-cloake-masterclass" \o ") [tonnato,](https://www.theguardian.com/food/2019/aug/19/tonnato-sauce-recipe-tomatoes-rachel-roddy) for £12, is an odd reversal of the usual dish. The tuna and anchovy-blitzed sauce is underneath the thin curls of roast pork rather than the other way round. It works well enough. An Italian take on [steak tartare](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2011/dec/11/nigel-slater-classic-steak-tartare), offered in a hollowed-out bone, is exceedingly pretty and well dressed. The words “churros pecorino” offer a thrilling savoury version of those beautiful, deep-fried extruded doughnuts. These are dense and clumsy and mouth-drying. A dish of deep-fried food arrives on our table, and it leaves unfinished.

However, barbecued fresh mackerel, the salty skin lightly blackened, the oils running, is a true delight; the curls of finely shaved, delicately acidulated fennel are the perfect foil. Crab linguine, coloured grey with ash according to our waiter, is included among the larger dishes, but is a dainty portion for £18. Still, it’s good pasta and properly sauced, with the pop of cherry tomatoes that have slumped in the heat of the sauce. The most Brazilian-inflected of the dishes is Iberico pork, served very pink, on a deep stew of black beans. It’s fully accessorised: there’s a loose [chimichurri](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/jul/03/chimichurri-argentina-cuisine-condiment), a bowl of [farofa](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/jun/05/black-bean-pork-feijoada-one-pot-stew-recipe-brazil), a claggy meal made from toasted cassava, and a tiny salad. It’s £38. And now I can hear the bill mounting.

We order the guava crème caramel because it sounds sexy and exotic. It comes topped with a pretty piece of lacy sugar work. As my companion lifts his spoon, he tells me how much he loves those supermarket crème caramels in their transparent ridged pots, six for £1.15 from Asda. We each take a spoonful and look at each other. “It’s exactly the same,” he says. I agree that it is. Obviously, we therefore like it; the £9 price tag, less so. However, we adore the ineffably light warm doughnuts, filled with a [dulce de leche](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/feb/28/dulce-de-leche-pancake-day-recipe-milk-jam). They finally keep the promise that the churros broke.

We have a £35 bottle of Abruzzo from the short wine list, which is overseen by the extremely knowledgable team from [Noble Rot](https://noblerot.co.uk/). That, a cocktail, and a glass of wine each, and we have our bill for £222. It includes 12.5% service, but there’s also a space open at the bottom for an extra gratuity. I question it. Our waiter says it’s a quirk of being inside a hotel, that they hate it and that they are fixing it. It occurs to me that if they really hated it that much, they could have put a line through it with a pen.

I know about rising rents, and rising salaries and rising ingredient costs. I know about all of that. Times are tough. I want restaurants to succeed, but experiences like this, which charge memorable money for an experience that will be forgotten in the morning, don’t help. Not far from Elis is [Manteca](https://www.theguardian.com/food/series/jay-rayner-on-restaurants/2022/jan/09/all), which works its way around a similar set of dishes and ideas, but with far greater intensity and an instinct to feed. Oh, the brown crab meat cacio e pepe. It’s not cheap but it is cheaper. And it’s very good. I knew, when I visited Manteca to review, that I would go back and spend my own money there. And I have, a number of times. I’m genuinely sorry that I can’t say the same about Elis. It’s as simple as that.