

VITTORIO RESTAURANT, CHELMSFORD

# From timber to tortellini

*Scandinavian wood used to be landed at Brown's Wharf – now diners tuck into Italian delights at Vittorio in the reborn Waterfront Place. Piers Ford joined them.*



**W**ith its promise of an alternative lifestyle, laid-back coolness and mellow attitudes, the hippy trail has lured countless thousands to the West Coast of America. Not many of them fetch up by a disused canal in Chelmsford.

But this is now the centre of the universe for Spin Thomson, owner of the buzzing Waterfront Place which includes restaurant Vittorio, the Italia Bar and Oven and a thriving conference and hospitality complex.

Turning his back on an engineering apprenticeship in the late 1970s and fed up with the grim old UK, he worked his way through Camp America and on down through the kitchens of Mexico, acquiring a taste for the restaurant business.

He returned in 1981 beaming with enthusiasm and determined to open his own eatery. Over the next 20 years, he carved a series of niches as a restaurateur. An unpromising newsagent with parking problems in Southend-on-Sea became the Simply Blues Café. In 1986, he opened his first Chelmsford premises, Back in Time, followed by another Simply Blues in Hornchurch and, in 1995, the highly reputable Blue Strawberry at Hatfield Peverel – a thriving bistro which he still owns.

In 1997, Chelmsford Borough Council asked whether he'd be interested in developing a restaurant site as part of the town's regeneration programme. Within two years Waterfront Place had risen on the site of Brown's Wharf, formerly the arrival point for Scandinavian timber and the coal used to fuel the town's gas supply. After decades of dereliction, the area is fast turning into a thriving commercial and residential district.



Spin Thomson (right) and father-in-law Mick Harper (left) meet Gordon Ramsay at Claridges

Thomson runs the complex with his hands firmly on the tiller; 22 chefs are employed to meet the needs not only of the Vittorio restaurant upstairs and the fast-moving Italia Bar where pizzas are prepared in an apple wood-burning oven seven days a week, but also of the burgeoning hospitality business which plays host to everything from Business Link presentations to weddings.

Thomson believes that 'Restaurant has become theatre'. Customers want to eat food that's well cooked, essentially simple with a hint of adventure, served politely in a stylish, comfortable atmosphere. Vittorio delivers with interest.

Its international cuisine, based around top quality ingredients, has established it as one of the town's most attractive restaurants for both business and private customers. The vaulted modern room hints at the airy proportions of a traditional barn but the accent is distinctly modern. Alcoves line one side, catering for diners who prefer privacy. The other looks out across the canal.

My dining companion and I were spoilt for choice on a Tuesday evening. My crab with peppers on a potato, chive and spring onion salad (£5.95) was lifted by a dribble of deliciously sweet, aged balsamic vinegar. His mussels in a delicate, Thai spiced cream with coriander (£6.50) were subtle with a pleasant

aftershock. Grudgingly, we exchanged morsels but both starters were too good to share.

I followed with sautéed calves liver and smoked bacon with bubble and squeak on a Bordeaux wine jus (£11.50). Chewing was superfluous; the liver melted on the tongue. My companion's special, grilled fillet of cod on a bed of wilted spinach and fresh wild mushrooms (£12.95) was equally well cooked and pronounced "excellent". Somehow we found room for homemade dolci (£4.60): Pavlova with Mascarpone and Berry Compote and a Capuccino Brulee with vanilla ice cream.

Mindful of our journey home up the A12, we were pleased at the selection of wine available by the glass. Generous slugs of Piesporter (£3.35) and Rioja (£4.35), together with a bottle of mineral water (£2.75) and large lattes (£1.75) to finish, brought our bill to just under £60. Not bad for a sophisticated night out in Chelmsford and we didn't have to take the hippy trail to find it. ✓

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Vittorio Restaurant at Waterfront Place, Wharf Road, Chelmsford, Essex  
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