

Restaurant review

Tom George Italiano

★★★★★

Remaking a modern classic

With a popular and respected fusion kitchen, dramatic decor and professional service, Tom George was always one of the anchors of the gastronomic ghetto around St. István tér and Sas utca. So it seemed crazy when they decided to mess with success. But the restaurant's owners, Leroy Co, recently opened Bacardi Only Bar, a similarly ambitious restaurant with a similarly inventive menu, just around the corner. Rather than compete with themselves, the owners obviously decided it was time for Tom George to offer something different.

They went Italian. After closing for several months of redecoration, Tom George reopened as Tom George Italiano. They hired chef Sergio Viti, apparently replaced a lot of the wait-staff, and redid the decor. The result is impressive. While they still seem to be working out kinks in service, and some of the prices appear inflated due to location and reputation, the new restaurant does the Tom George name proud.

They do serve great pizza and pasta, but the best choices are probably the meat and fish. Although much of the fish cooked here was likely frozen once, the flesh remains firm and tender and the seafood prices remain reasonable.

There is a considerable amount of good seafood throughout the menu, including tasty starters like sautéed black mussels in garlic wine sauce (Ft2,750). Another classic Italian starter, Carpaccio with rucola and parmesan (Ft2,700), is paper-thin sliced beef that maintains a hearty, rare-steak flavour.

Fancier fish have a taste that can transport you to the Mediterranean

The own-made pastas are excellent, as you'd expect from a good Italian restaurant. Here, again, they offer seafood options, like 'penne in pink sauce with rucola and cocktail shrimp' (Ft2,550) or 'rock lobster tail Port Cervo style' (Ft3,800/gram), but there are also recommendable fish-less options, like 'penne with vodka' (Ft1,850) and 'tortellini stuffed with squash in spinach sauce' (Ft1,890).

The pizza is northern Italian style, with a thin and crispy crust and relatively light toppings. If you like a high-carb Pizza Hut-style soft-dough pie, you may be disappointed, but this variety is tasty and much more



Che bella! Tom George goes Italiano in its brand new guise



authentically Italian. There are 30 types of pizzas, ranging in price from Ft1,490 to Ft2,850.

With all due respect to the pizza and pasta, the main reason to eat at Tom George Italiano may be the juicy, tender meat and fish dishes listed on the section of the menu dedicated to grilled food.

Meat eaters can get satisfying deer rack (Ft1,290/100gr) or Florentine-style t-bone (Ft1,050/100gr). Grilled seafood starts with squid (Ft3,800), cooked golden brown around the edges with a perfect texture. Fancier fish, like sea bass, sea bream and

swordfish steak (all Ft4,200), are apparently flown in fresh, and coming off this grill they have a taste that can transport you to the Mediterranean. You can complete the southern seaside sensation by having the mangold (swiss chard) with spiced butter and pepperoncini (Ft1,050) a spinach-like dish traditionally accompanying fish.

There are many desserts, all decorative, decadent and delicious. Classic Italian-style offerings include panna cotta with chocolate caramel or forest fruits (Ft980), profiterole (Ft1,050) and tiramisu with chocolate, caramel or forest fruits (Ft980).

Beverages include a good selection of generously mixed, competitively priced cocktails and 75 Hungarian and Italian wines, mostly ranging in the expensive bracket.

The redecoration involved going from ultra modern to rustic and nostalgic. The big interior, designed by Ákos Bara, flashes a lot of brick and natural wood, and the ceiling has been painted over with black words and cartoons on a sepia background, giving an old-fashioned look. The overall effect is pleasing, if a bit forced, but this place never went for subtle decor.

Between the large dining room and the terrace, there are a lot of areas to serve, and the waitstaff covers them reasonably well. It seems much of the staff is new, and still in training, but the training is working. Though it may take a while for the waiter or waitress to show up, when they arrive, they are willing to spend time at your table, knowledgeably answering questions about the menu and taking special requests.

With neighbours such as Café Kőr, Dió, Mokka, Stand Bistro, and their new brother 'BOB', Tom George Italiano has to stay on their toes to stay in the running. So far it seems they are.

V. Október 6 utca 8 (266 3525). M3 Arany János utca. Mon-Thur, Sun noon-midnight; Fri, Sat noon-1am. Credit AmEx, MC, V.

Bar reviews

Billy Rotten Bisztro

★★★★★

Little-known gem on a busy street

The heavily verdant Rottenbiller utca that cuts through the top of District VII sees plenty of cars but not so much foot traffic. It's essentially a residential neighbourhood with no proper drinking establishments to speak of, which makes finding a bar like **Billy Rotten** here even more of an anomaly. Step inside and you'll find a simple drinks menu and daily lunch specials, augmented by a decent selection of à la carte dishes, a sweet courtyard patio and options for active leisure including ping-pong and table football.

After years of flying solo in the hood, Billy Rotten has managed to keep busy during the week with a steady flow of students from the nearby faculty of veterinary sciences. Although things tend to quiet down in the evenings and at weekends, it retains a peaceful charm that spiked with the odd DJ and live act. The best asset is of course its courtyard patio where a handful of tables await thirsty clientele. Shielded from the street by a massive wall of glass that doubles as a bicycle shelter, the spacious courtyard surrounded by a modern apartment complex with cantilevered



Funky decor and retro features Billy Rotten hides its charms away

balconies and odd grassy rock formations, set this outdoor drinking space apart from the throngs of run down bars in the city centre.

On the street level of a modern structure of glass and metal flanked by late 19th-century apartment buildings, these contrasts extend into the interior where fun and funky decor blends modern urban murals with retro fixtures in a colour scheme of

earthy browns and turquoise, accented by bright red vinyl armchairs, inventive light fixtures, plenty of windows and a laminated mahogany bar that is the centrepiece of the space.

Beers on tap include Staropramen at Ft490 by the pint, and Hoegaarden for Ft720, while spirits range from Ft600-Ft680 and hover around Ft800-Ft900 for the finer grade *pálinkas*. The food menu includes simple and

hearty weekday Hungarian lunch specials at Ft850 while the summer menu offers more continental options from Caesar salad for Ft1,400, chicken wrapped in bacon with fries for Ft1,500 or a BLT for Ft1,000, among others. Coffees are spot on, particularly the caffè latte, and the friendly service, relaxed atmosphere, and ample seating room inside and out make it a perfect spot to visit if you happen to be in the neighbourhood.

But why does Billy Rotten live so far off the beaten path? Probably because this place was never intended to be a public bar, but rather a meeting point for the residents of the apartment complex built nearly eight years ago on a model of North-American community living, with some added comforts of hotel-style accommodation. But the project was never fully realised, at least not in terms of the comforts, leaving the residents who bought into the costly scheme with a bitter taste in their mouths. At least they can wash it down with a refreshing alcoholic beverage.

*Billy Rotten Bisztro VII.
Rottenbiller utca 32 (no phone).
Trolley 74. Mon-Fri 9am-midnight,
Sat, Sun 4pm-midnight. No credit
cards.*

Budapest premiere

Time Out Budapest

Beta hip hop hits

Date: 8th August, 2009

**djs: Nafta
Suefo
Beta**

Chachacha – Margitsziget
(next to Margaret Bridge)

Free entry!

Time Out
Budapest

Cha-cha-cha
underground cafe

**If you're bored
it's not our fault**



Books

Still the best seller



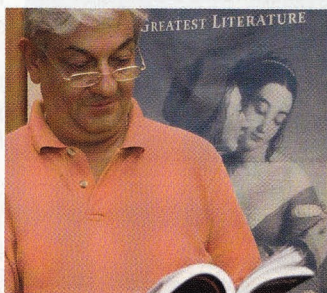
Budapest's oldest private bookshop specialising in English titles is a reliable source for the latest releases. **Sofia Baidak** checks out what's new.

Budapest's oldest English Language bookshop, Bestsellers, remains the city's most comprehensive shop for English books and the best place to look for newly published titles. Although the capital now boasts several other retail outlets for English-language books, that wasn't the way when Bestsellers opened up in the heart of town in 1992.

'In the beginning of the 1990s, there were only state-owned shops feeding people with the books that were not dangerous from a political point of view — reading that couldn't give people ideas,' says Tony Láng, founder and owner of Bestsellers. 'I wanted to give people interesting things, new and exciting things.'

His store quickly became a hub for English-speakers in town, and a few years later Bestsellers increased their stock with a whole section of books in French. Today, the shelves of this spacious shop are full of academic and non-fiction titles, bestselling and classic fiction and children's books. With more than 10,000 volumes in all, this is the city's largest collection of new English-language books for sale.

At first, Láng said, choosing what books to sell was like groping in the dark, but he soon figured out the types of titles people want, and he now receives deliveries directly from publishers or their distributors in the UK, US and France. Lang says



'I still like to serve my customers myself, because I am a curious person'

that Bestsellers does not rely on local wholesalers because they don't want to depend on somebody else's choice and preferences.

'It's all about our customers' choice. We have an excellent, helpful staff, who have worked in the shop for years, but I still like to serve my customers myself, because I am a curious person,' says Láng. 'I talk to them to learn who they are, where they come from, what they like. This way I can adjust my offers to their personality.'

His collection includes a wide selection of titles on social sciences, philosophy, history, politics, linguistics and finance. The shop also makes seasonal adjustments, by expanding its selection of fiction during Christmas, stocking up with travel guides in summer months and offering more language textbooks and dictionaries in autumn.

If a book is not in stock, Bestsellers promises to get it deliv-



At Bestsellers Mag rack, top left, owner Tony Láng, left, and entry, above

ered. Lang says his store can obtain any English language book that is currently in print, and sometimes books that are out-of-print. 'We have clients who order books on geochemistry,' he says. 'I know nothing about geochemistry, but it's not necessary, because they don't need my knowledge about the book, just my ability to deliver that book to them.'

And local customers have grown to depend on that ability. Last year, when former US President Bill Clinton was in Budapest for a special dinner, organisers ordered and received 80 copies of Clinton's biography, before the event, from Bestsellers.

Books can be ordered at the shop, by phone or online, at www.bestsellers.hu.

The shop also stocks foreign

newspapers and magazines, and readers can have their favourite periodicals reserved for them.

The market has changed a lot from the bad-old days, when good books in English were scarce, but Bestsellers is still filling the needs of today's readers in Budapest.

V. Október 6. utca 11 (312 1295 www.bestsellers.hu). Mon-Fri 9am-6.30pm; Sat 10am-5pm; Sun 10am-4pm. Credit Amex, MC, V.

5 most wanted

Top sellers at Bestsellers in June

1. **Vera and the Ambassador** by Vera and Donald Blinken
2. **The Bridge At Andau** by James Michener
3. **Every Statue Tells a Story** by Bob Dent
4. **Appeal** by John Grisham
5. **The Given Day** by Dennis Lehane