

The Garden Slug

This unpretentious diner serves homely, wholesome fare.
Amy Yeong and Foong Chi Hou, Photos courtesy of The Garden Slug

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After receiving an enthusiastic e-mail from a reader recommending this new eatery in Telok Kurau, we decided to check out The Garden Slug.

When asked why the restaurant chose to name it such, owner Sharon Foong (a.k.a "The Director of Coffee Freshness") explained that she and her two partners wanted something that would make people go "Huh?" and find out more about it.

This simple marketing strategy is apparently working, as many of the eatery's customers came to know about it by word of mouth.

Quirky name aside, the eatery has a very relaxed and laid-back feel, with a seating capacity of about 50. It provides free Wi-Fi access, and even keeps a projector on standby for students who frequent the place. The motto of the eatery is "Just ask", and the owners even encourage their customers to personalise their food. One feels immediately at home in the unpretentious diner with its personal and cheerful service.

How does The Garden Slug fare? Here's our take:



Zesty Beef Salad (\$10.90)

A: The Garden Slug's blog mentioned that this was one of its signature dishes, so of course we had to try it. I really like the way the beef was prepared - the strips of beef were medium-rare and not too tough, while the use of lime gave an unusual but highly enjoyable kick to the salad. I liked the lime and lemongrass dressing, although it's a bit of an overdose.

C: What struck me was the sheer attractiveness of the presentation. The salad was served in a glass bowl, which had the effect of a display case. The natural colour of the red lettuce coupled with the thin slices of chilli and the brownish red of the beef strips artfully layered on top created a sight that yelled for attention. The vegetables were very fresh and were both crisp and juicy. The tender beef strips were an agreeable contrast to the crunchiness of the greens. However, the lime and lemongrass dressing was a little too sour for me, which was a pity because I felt the salad was pretty

good otherwise.

What was most distinctive to me was the fact that it was so natural, with none of the fancy dressings and trappings you might find in other restaurants.

Clear Chicken Broth with Scallops & Melon (\$8.50 per bowl / \$4.50 per cup)

C: The soup looked pretty much like what my grandmother used to cook. We ordered the cup sized soup, and it was filled to the brim with a large chunk of winter melon, some scallops and even a chicken wing. It was teeming with flavour, while the sweetness of the scallops, chicken and melon were balanced well with no one ingredient overpowering the others. The wild rice was a stroke of genius, the long grains providing a nice texture to the otherwise clear soup.

A: I found this dish very hearty and wholesome. "Recipe Engineer" Sophia Leong told us that the soup simmered for about four hours, so no wonder it was so tasty. The addition of wild rice gave some bite to the dish. I liked the fact that you could choose the serving size - the cup is perfect as a prelude to a meal, while those who want it as a main meal can order a whole bowl.

Pasta with Roasted Pumpkin and Plump Juicy Prawns (\$13.90)

A: If you like pumpkin, you'll be in for a treat. Even if you don't like pumpkin, the taste of the pumpkin is so subtle you might just find yourself enjoying this pasta dish. The sauce is a tomato-cream sauce, which isn't readily available elsewhere. Sharon tells us that the pasta used is "Spaghettini No. 5", which is thinner than regular spaghetti. "This takes a shorter time to cook - about seven minutes compared to regular spaghetti, which can take about 11 minutes to cook."

The thinner pasta reminded me of beehoon goreng, but the combination with the tomato-cream sauce, pumpkin, and thin spaghetti was a refreshing change from the usual Marinara or Bolognese.

C: I was apprehensive about having pumpkin in my pasta, but I changed my mind as soon as I took the first mouthful. The addition of pumpkin gave the pasta a slightly sweet taste and balanced the tanginess of the tomato-cream sauce, while the sweet prawns added a seafood twist. The combined effect was a deliciously and boldly refreshing dish melding sweet, sour and savoury flavours. The generous portions should sate even the most ravenous of customers.

Ciabatta Bread strips with Herb butter

C: The bread strips were served first, in a brown plastic "basket". It may seem unusual for bread to be served in strips, but the beauty of it was that it felt more like a snack. I was pleasantly surprised to find that the spread was not your normal garlic spread but imported Belgian butter mixed with rosemary by the owners. Apparently the bread is baked daily by an Austrian baker for the diner.

Smoked Salmon and Dill sandwich (\$7.90)

C: The Smoked Salmon and Dill sandwich was marvellous. Served with a side of tortilla chips and fresh tomato cream in the same "basket" as the bread strips, it looked most appetising, and I wasn't disappointed. The panini bread was just thick enough to hold the fillings but not so thick as to make every mouthful feel like an exercise in mastication. The salmon filling was very generous, making every bite a pleasure. The dill and tomato in the sandwich helped to balance the taste of the salmon; the tomato adding juiciness and moisture and the dill adding a hint of herbal tastes to the smoked salmon. The bread provided texture and crunch with its crispy crust.

The Sweet Sweet Slug (\$15.90)

C: What sounds like a candied garden herbivore is actually a sampling of all the deserts served in The Garden Slug. The miniature portions of Tiramisu, Brownie popsicles, and Pear William were accompanied by strawberries topped with fresh mascarpone and mint.

If the desserts sound new to you, it's because they are creations of the owners. The tiramisu was excellent. Served in a small cup, it was fragrant with coffee and liqueur. It was moist and creamy, without being too sweet, while the coffee left a pleasant aftertaste.



The brownie popsicles were another innovation. They are actually dipped in chocolate much like a fondue is, leaving a crispy chocolate shell. The brownies themselves were sweet, flavourful and had a slightly "fluffy" texture. The best part is they are served like ice cream sticks, which makes them easy to eat.

The Pear William is actually a stewed ripened sweet pear sauteed in white wine and cinnamon, topped with a scoop of vanilla ice cream. The pear itself had a pleasant aroma and a firm skin, with the flesh so soft it melted in my mouth. Despite what it sounds like, it actually wasn't overly sweet. The vanilla ice cream had a touch of cinnamon powder on top and a cinnamon stick for good measure. The end result is a very smooth ice cream with a hint of the slight spiciness and aroma of cinnamon.

In all, both reviewers agree that The Garden Slug serves up homely, wholesome fare which strives to cater to everyone. There are a number of vegetarian dishes available on the menu, and this should please vegetarian diners who are often stuck with limited choices. However, what impressed us was the unpretentiousness of everything about the eatery - be it the decor, the food, or the service - and the focus on providing good food at reasonable prices. If you are looking for a good meal with none of the fancy frills or trappings, make a trip down to The Garden Slug.

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