

Reviews

Restaurant Merkelbach



★★★★★

Dining in coach

On its website, Restaurant Merkelbach promises 'honest meat', plenty of organic products and 'forgotten ingredients', using classic recipes that have been given a new lease of life. Respect for heirloom ingredients and recipes is a positive trend.

Surprisingly, none of these catchphrases make their way on to the simple black-and-white menu at Merkelbach, a new restaurant situated in the former coach house of the stately Huize Frankendael, a national monument and Amsterdam's last *buiten* (manorial estate). Luckily, though, the focus on freshness was reflected in the food.

The salad featuring grilled courgettes, mozzarella, cherry tomatoes and pine nuts was fresh and simple, while a plate of antipasti (a good selection of cured meats, artichokes and a creamy goat's cheese) hit the spot.



It was served with the restaurant's excellent bread, which – in good French tradition – just kept coming. This was followed by duck breast with red cabbage and potatoes and a garnish of purslane salad: just the right balance of tender, fatty duck and satisfying seasonal vegetables.

Flavourful pumpkin ravioli, with an olive oil and herb dressing and roasted pistachios, was the star of the night. It's the kind of dish you devour and then wish you'd savoured more slowly.

We ordered white and red wines by the glass (they offer two quality varieties of each). The chocolate cake, served with a nutty ice cream, was so chocolatey it would meet the demands of even the most raving chocoholic.

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The zabaglione improved by the spoonful: boozy Marsala added punch to its light yet creamy texture, while amaretti biscuits offered a crunchy contrast.

It was good to see some traditional Dutch ingredients on the menu – as promised – but we couldn't really detect any modern twist, aside from the pristine presentation.

Beauty is not only found on the plate, but literally surrounds one here. Restaurant Merkelbach is located on the border of Frankendael Park in Watergraafsmeer. Huize Frankendael dates from the 17th century, a time when rich merchants retreated to their country homes on weekends to get away from the stench of the city centre's canals.

Unfortunately, 'nature' in autumnal Amsterdam means squishing through muddy puddles on the trek to the door – don't wear your favourite *Louboutins*. The restaurant is decorated in monochromatic tones, with dark stone flooring, white walls and simple furniture. Tasteful and elegant – with one glaring exception: hideous mustard-coloured couches along one wall.

As so often happens with brand new restaurants, the staff didn't yet

have its act together. Firstly, they'd overbooked, so there was no table ready when we arrived and we were asked to wait at the bar, which is oversized for the room, yet offers no seating. This left us standing next to diners at their already cramped tables in the surprisingly small space, with dirty dishes piling up right behind us.

After waiting for some time, we were taken down a few steps into another room and seated on a simple wooden bench at a too-low table, which was covered with wax dripping the waitress later picked off with her fingernails. We faced a stone sink piled high with newspapers.

The room had a dirty floor, badly cracked white tiles and lighting so bright it would make a Chinese fast-food restaurant feel romantic. It felt as if we'd been seated in 'coach', rather than in the first-class area of the coach house we'd entered through. A complaint to the waitress didn't help. If we hadn't had to review the restaurant, we'd have left at this point.

While our waitress had the best intentions, her lack of experience showed. So, for instance, she didn't have a clue what the three-course menu included, was frequently forgetful and served us a carafe of tap water, which tasted of rusty old pipes, instead of the sparkling mineral water we'd ordered. Service is like background music: you don't notice it unless it's really bad.



Restaurant Merkelbach's philosophy – authentic taste – was inspired by the aesthetics of Huize Frankendael manor house, and Chef Geert Burema delivers. Their amateurish waiting staff needs some coaching, and they need to iron out a few of the all-important finer points if they want to be taken seriously, but the food is almost flawless.

Restaurant Merkelbach, Middenweg 72 (665 0880/restaurantmerkelbach.nl). Open daily 08.30-23.00. Set menu 3 courses €33. Karin Engelbrecht

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