



Brutti Ma Buoni (ugly but nice)

Amazing wall decoration @ Animal Orchestra



ANIMAL ORCHESTRA

It's not the menu alone that brings people to Animal Orchestra, but it does help. The cafe's opening movement is a breakfast of Spanish-style baked eggs (go for the number seven, with sardines), muesli and toast. It then serves up a symphonic composition of paninis, soups and hearty mains (think continental sausages and mash) alongside a short, considered wine list, and a range of imported and local beers. At any time of day, the coffee is excellent, as are the Brutti Ma Buoni, 'ugly but nice', bikkies.

A group of four walks off Grattan Street into Animal Orchestra and takes a table next to ours. "I told you this place is like Montmartre," one of the group says, referring to the inner-city Parisian suburb cluttered with creative types and vibrant cafes, open well into the night.

I'd have to agree. I've been eating, drinking and caffeinating at the two-year old cafe-cum bar almost since it opened,

in which short time it's become a Melbourne institution, complete with a committed clutch of regulars.

Animal Orchestra is in Parkville, opposite Melbourne University, in an otherwise cool-free vacuum a few blocks from Lygon Street. It occupies a grand, converted terrace house that previously hosted a posh French restaurant that failed to find favour with the local student population. In glorious contrast, warm weather packs out Animal Orchestra's outdoor tables and courtyard; cool weather draws people in to its intimate interior, furnished with an inspired collection of antiques.

We arrive at about eight in the evening. Lately, Animal Orchestra has turned into an excellent place to start a night out.

We've ordered some tapas: sharp, tangy saganaki with lemon and marinated olives; and lightly fried, moist tuna balls with aoli, both served with toasted crusty bread; a house red and an Argentinian Quilmes beer.

Our food arrives and the plush corner settee I've had my eye on becomes available. We settle in, watch the crowd and visually pick through the thousands of magazine photos jostling for attention on the central wall, opposite us: an African man sitting on a milk crate outside a butcher, a dolls-house view of a Japanese capsule hotel, grinning red-kerchiefed children with hoes over their shoulders.

John Tummino, who runs the place along with his older brother Marcelo, tells us that each square metre of wall took about five hours, not including cutting it all out. It's a fair effort, especially given there are at least twenty square metres, but it's that level of care and attention to detail that brings people to Animal Orchestra, and keeps it thrumming through daylight and dusk.

IL DUCE SI DIVENTA

Il Duce Si Diventa is three blocks further north-west of Animal Orchestra, in Carlton. I've been attracted, like a moth, to its pink glow.

A giant, paint-flaking Buddha greets us and gestures to an oil-painted nude on the ceiling. Above the mid-level bar an arch-backed blonde swings like a languid fan. I don't know where to look, I don't know where to go. From the entrance, stairs lead down to two lower rooms, and up to the mid-level. From there more stairs lead up to the long main bar.

The unsettling, amusing psychotropic clutter is everywhere. The main bar is lit with marshmallow-shaped lamps that throw a pink cast along the spine of a life-size porcelain great dane; ornately carved gold-framed mirrors reflect the lined up spirits, the singular sign we're actually in a bar, on planet Earth.

It's a bar; I'm sure it's a bar when I sip the sweet orange cocktail in my hand. Downstairs, cherubic busts gaze upon piled encyclopaedias; ultraviolet-lit mannequins smile through perspex from a small room below Drummond Street.

I'm by no means drunk, but I can see that intoxication at Il Duce could land you in a psych ward. It's not only the decor that plays on my mind – precisely what sort of person creates something like this?

Possibly the same kind that wants to keep it in good nick: near the toilets, a workshop is kitted out for the re-application of lippie to the various helpless female, and the fixing of broken kitsch.

While we've been here, each person who's walked in has remarked on the startling weirdness before ordering a drink and finding some secluded nook to wind down. In function, Il Duce is much the same as any other Carlton watering hole. In form, it's like a journey inside the head of a mentally deranged Italian art historian with lady troubles.



Italianale style in the heart of Carlton

- AT A GLANCE -

ANIMAL ORCHESTRA

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Animal Orchestra and Il Duce Si Diventa are only few blocks apart, but they sing to very different tunes.

