

Vapiano – an urban fuel stop

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Vapiano's menu is comprehensive with its 21 pasta dishes and 18 pizzas.

If you are hungry and looking for cheap and easy food – preferably in the form of pizza and pasta – then you are in for a treat.

I don't know if you've noticed, but Finns love cards – the payment kind, as opposed to the playing ones. Not just credit cards but loyalty cards of all kinds. It makes one feel part of a club, you see. This predilection for waving around bits of plastic may well account for the initial success of Vapiano in central Helsinki (and, for that matter, the 25 other countries it is established in – demonstrating that card love isn't limited to Suomi). At this German-founded international chain, you see, when you enter you are given a chip card that you must guard fiercely no matter what, for it is your key to eating or drinking anything.

The Vapiano system

The system works thus: clutching your (non-transferable) card for dear life you find a seat and check the menu. When you've decided on what you're going to eat you get up and deliver your order to the kitchen in person. They take your card, wave it over a technologically advanced till and then hand it back to you along with a small black pager. Before heading back to your seat you might want to drop in at the bar for a drink – hand the card to the barman – and take your beverage with you.

Return to your table and make conversation until your pager buzzes, indicating that your food is ready for collection. Return to the kitchen's serving window and pick up your grub. Back to your seat. Enjoy your meal. Don't forget to take your card to the bar again if you need another drink. When you're done, give your card to the greeter on your way out, receive your final bill and pay up. Congratulations. You have enjoyed the Vapiano experience.

The chip-card system is one of two selling points offered by the chain. The other is that all of the dishes are freshly made to order, with dough and pasta being produced on-site. On my visit I tasted a couple of different pasta dishes – the carbonara and the ravioli – and they were pretty good. The carbonara was not creamy enough and lacked the richness you would expect. But the ravioli was better, with a decent tomato sauce. The salad was likewise good and freshly made with a nice dressing.

The menu is comprehensive, with 21 pasta dishes and 18 pizzas costing from 7.50-12 euros.

No pampering

The comparison to the golden arches is no accident. Vapiano market themselves as being Italian fast food, and it certainly feels like it. The décor is all pale wood, white paint and high tables with trendy stools. It is not a place for relaxing and enjoying a long meal. And I wouldn't choose it for a romantic dinner, that's for sure. Like McDonald's it's possibly designed as much to free up tables as quickly as possible.

The fast-food comparison extends to the previously mentioned payment system. I don't know about you but I regard eating out as the culinary equivalent of having a cutthroat shave at a professional barber's. Sure, I could shave at home with my rusty old Bic, or I could sit back and let the pros take over once in a while and enjoy the feeling of being pampered. Vapiano is like being at a barber's where you have to get up every 30 seconds to rinse the razor. Having to leave your table to get another glass of wine or order a dessert is a hassle, frankly. True, they do say that you are able to order from the table, but on my visit there was only one member of staff hovering round the first-floor eating area – who was fully occupied with clearing tables.

Admittedly I went on the same afternoon as Finland were playing Sweden in some sports-related event, so Vapiano had its fair share of chanting Vikings – an unfortunate coincidence that created a somewhat boisterous atmosphere. A peaceful meal wasn't really on the cards. However, Vapiano is a fine option if you're shopping in town and need a fairly cheap, decent Italian lunch in a very central location.

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Opening hours:
Mon-Thu 11-24
Fri 11-02
Sat 12-02
Sun 12-24