



Abu Dhabi has been experiencing an explosion of new hotels and restaurants opening around the city and we've been waiting patiently for a so-called 'Asian fusion' restaurant that really delivers substance as well as style. We want fresh ingredients and clean, authentic Asian flavours – just because you dip something in tempura does not necessarily make it 'Asian'. Could the latest Indonesian-Thai-Vietnamese-Chinese offering at the Crowne Plaza on Hamdan Street finally be what we've been waiting for?

Cho Gao certainly channels South-East Asian chic, creating an almost palpable sense of style with its rustic charm, low-lit interior and traditional-meets-contemporary décor. The breezy atmosphere is matched by the restaurant's easy elegance, while the melting pot of cultures that have influenced the menu really whetted our appetite.

Another thing that strikes you almost immediately is the freshness of the air inside – this is one of the first restaurants in Abu Dhabi that is completely non-smoking and it's good to see (or should that be smell?) somewhere brave enough to take a stand before being forced into it when the rather ambiguous smoking laws are finally deciphered.

We kick off with a sharing starter, the Cho Gao platter – a selection of grilled chicken and beef satay, crispy duck spring rolls and seafood gyoza. Served almost immediately by friendly and

attentive staff, the food is beautifully presented and deliciously cooked.

The modest selection of mains won't overwhelm you but the flavours in the dishes are so pronounced that you'll no doubt find a favourite and find it in your heart to forgive them. Traditional dishes such as the crispy Peking duck make an expected appearance, but the mango and soft shell crab salad is certainly one not to be overlooked.

A healthy range of made-to-share dishes can be eaten alone or used to augment your main, and with signature dishes such as the Cho Gao glazed beef short ribs up for grabs, it's easy to overlook the sensibilities of a prudent diet and stuff yourself silly before the night is through.

Unusually, for a restaurant of this type, the desserts are not just an afterthought tacked on to the end of the menu. Chef Lloyd Cremer has created some really unique and appealing offerings – we found the caramelised lime and basil sorbet and the wild verbena ice cream particularly tasty.

This is Asian cuisine as it should be and more: we'll definitely be back.

What? Cho Gao

Where? Crowne Plaza, Hamdan Street

Cost: Average AED 115 for starter, main and desert excluding drinks

Why? Excellent value for money; funky, contemporary decor; no smoking restaurant

Why not? Service occasionally a little too efficient

We say: Finally, a stylish downtown restaurant that won't break the bank

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