

Meat-free bliss in the capital

New leaf for London

RETO FREI was just seven when he became a vegetarian. The sight of his two older brothers vying to wrest a leg off a roast chicken one meal so repelled him that he resolved to give up flesh there and then. Not only that, but his brothers eventually came round to his way of eating and together they went on to found a chain of vegetarian restaurants, called **Tibits**, in their native Switzerland, with a little help from Hiltl (Europe's oldest veggie restaurant, founded in Zurich in 1898).

Now Tibits has come to the UK, with the opening last month of branches in the new Westfield Centre in Shepherd's Bush and the West End of London. The West End branch is tucked around the back of Regent Street in Heddon Street, which you turn into by the L'Occitane perfumerie.

Tibits is a restaurant-cum-bar, with a salon area for lounging in, all sleekly designed with oriental-style lighting to give warmth and colour. Its centre-piece is the oval buffet, where three dozen salads and a daily choice of a dozen hot dishes compete for selection. What you do is to take your plate round and when you're done, you simply pay by weight at the bar (£2, or £1.60 takeaway, per 100g). And if you fancy a little more, you can simply take your plate and circumnavigate the buffet again. You can snack lightly for under £5 or sup well for a little over a tenner.



PHOTOS: JOHN RIFKIN

Tibits: plans to revolutionise vegetarian eating in London

The whole display looks fresh and colourful, with some terrific salad combinations: apple and tofu with ginger, quinoa — the fashionable South America grain — with vegetables in a sweet chilli sauce, Indian chickpeas with carrot, yoghurt and cumin, a lentil dhal, dried beans with walnut and coriander.

The hot range is just as cosmopolitan: crunchy home-made falafel, which go well with a sweet date chutney; croquettes of jalapeno peppers and sour cream; a pumpkin stroganoff with a wonderful creamy sauce and the vegetable perfectly cooked — not too soft, not too firm.

You'd be missing out, too, if you didn't try one of the speciality fruit

juices, like Fitness — a blend of apple, lemon and fennel — where the herb is surprisingly enjoyable, distinctive but not overpowering; or Autumn, a wine-coloured mix of grape, apple, orange and blueberries.

The dessert options include gingerbread and orange tiramisu, or you can pick up an espresso and amaretti, a wheat-free and nut-rich tart, from the bar.

Tibits is especially well-placed for a business lunch or, since it is open until midnight, an after-theatre bite. There is also a breakfast menu, too.

"It's not unusual," sings Tom Jones over the loudspeaker. But Tibits is unusual, bringing a fresh dimension to vegetarian eating in the capital.



Warm and cosy oriental-style eating arrangements inside this London restaurant-bar