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FOOD & DRINK

Restaurants

Vast, over-the-top, South African-themed... what could possibly go wrong, asks John Lanchester

The otherwise pretty rank Jack Black film *Tenacious D In The Pick Of Destiny* has one great moment, when our hero attempts a showy lead guitar riff. "Amazing," says Kyle Gass, Jack's mentor. Then, with lethal timing, he adds: "-ly bad!"

Shaka Zulu, a huge, new, South African-themed restaurant located right slap in the middle of Camden Lock, is like that. The "amazing" bit is what hits you first. The 20ft tall statue of a Zulu warrior outside? That's the least of it. In fact, the 20ft Zulu is relatively quiet and understated by the standards of the interior. There are plenty of other huge Zulus, mixed with African reliefs on the walls, large African animal statues - you name it - all in a huge underground space set over two levels, one of nightclub and bar, the other of restaurant. It's the maddest theme restaurant idea I've seen in some time. I had been told the setup was "borderline offensive" but it isn't quite, because it's done with such energy. It's as if the designer was trying to give you the feeling that you're simultaneously watching both *Daktari* and *Mandingo* on a giant split-screen while high on hallucinogens in a giant Ibiza nightclub. Lord alone knows what all this must have cost. The staff seem up for the adventure, in a good-humoured way, and the service is not just nice but exceptionally so. So that's the "amazing". The "-ly



PHIL STABLES FOR THE GUARDIAN



bad!" arrives with the food. Oh boy. The food and wine keep up the South African theme. This needn't be a problem, because although it would be untrue to say that "cuisine" is the first thing you attach to "South Africa" in a word-association test, the country's restaurant culture has a reputation for being decent, and the wine is both good and good value. So there is no certainty of culinary disaster. Unfortunately, culinary disaster is what occurs.

There's a temptation to reach for exotic metaphors while describing bad food, but the commonest form of bad food isn't worth the effort: it's food that doesn't taste of anything at all. Biltong, for instance, a type of air-dried meat, at Shaka Zulu is served as a starter, shaved, with

a dip on the side. The beef had the texture of trainers and the taste of nothing - nothing at all. Chewing it was an odd sensation, because my mouth was energetically at work, while my tastebuds were coming up with no response. Ostrich rump, a £20 main course, had next to no flavour and a texture like a tennis ball, not exactly inedible, but putting up a damned good fight. Worst of all, by some distance, were the chips, which seemed not to have been seasoned and managed to be rigid all the way through, but not crunchy. It's not often you encounter astonishingly nasty chips.

Other dishes were a small fraction better. I thought the bobotie, a Cape Malay curry dish, was a dish from before people had worked out they

liked real curry - a curry from the time when curry had raisins in it. However, the person who ordered it said it was fine by her, "like a not unpleasant school dinner". Spatch-cocked chicken was OK, as was one of the puddings, a Rooibos tea-flavoured crème brûlée; the other pudding, a milk tart, was soggy and tasted of nothing but sugar. Fried doughnuts had the same taste, but the texture of rope.

Shaka Zulu isn't cheap: the food bill between four of us (with only two starters) came to £160. The wine list has some interest, but the mark-ups are brisk. A recipe for disaster? No, because guess what? The place was packed. Admittedly, we went on a Saturday night because I wanted to see the place in full flow and with the general buzz roaring - which it was. The crowd was young, cashed-up, and either didn't notice or didn't care how lousy the food was. Perhaps the secret to the restaurant business in this country - in particular in London - is not to concentrate on the food, but to give people a place they want to go and be with large numbers of other people who appear to be having a good time. If they see that, they'll tell themselves that they, too, are having a good time. Shaka Zulu has mastered that, to me, slightly depressing trick.

Shaka Zulu Stables Market, London NW1, 020-3376 9911. Open all week, dinner only, 6pm-2am. Meal for two with drinks and service, around £100.

SOLUTIONS

Quiz (page 89) 1 Preston (in 1958). 2 Brave New World. 3 Mother And Child Reunion by Paul Simon. 4 Guyana. 5 Cocaine. 6 Only Connect. 7 25. 8 Saracens rugby team. 9 Husbands of Lady Margaret

Beaufort. 10 Theatres at National Theatre. 11 Red and black: novel; jumper; team colours. 12 Lemurs. 13 Played on film by Dustin Hoffman. 14 Mandarin. 15 Xs: The X Factor; the XX; XXX; XXXX.

Scrabble See board right. Answer: YOGHURT. Word of the week: HADAL - pertaining to the ocean depths. **Crossword** See board far right.

