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World's Best Restaurant?

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Duck shoot

Is **The Fat Duck** really The World's Best Restaurant? Is Heston Blumenthal a genius or a quack? MÁIRTÍN MAC CON IOMAIRÉ went to find out



clockwise from left: Mango and Douglas Fir Puree Bavaise of lychee and mango, blackcurrant sorbet, blackcurrant and green peppercorn jelly; Chilled mousse of green tea, lime and vodka prepared by dipping a spoonful into a vat of liquid nitrogen; Fat Duck restaurant. Photography Ashley Watts (Fat Duck head chef)

My dining companion and I were on our way to the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery when we decided to indulge in dinner at the infamous Fat Duck. Our timing was perfect as Paul Williams and Róisín Ó Neill, two recent graduates from the Dublin Institute of Technology's Culinary Arts degree course of which I am a lecturer, were working in the kitchen. Both graduates secured a three-month internship with funding from the Leonardo da Vinci mobility programme and were subsequently asked to stay on permanently.

The restaurant itself is unassuming, located on a busy main road in Bray-on-Thames, Berkshire. The décor is far from the dense pile carpets and marble bathrooms you expect to find in a three-star Michelin restaurant. But what it lacks in ostentation it more than makes up for in substance. I have never before experienced waiters who were as knowledgeable and

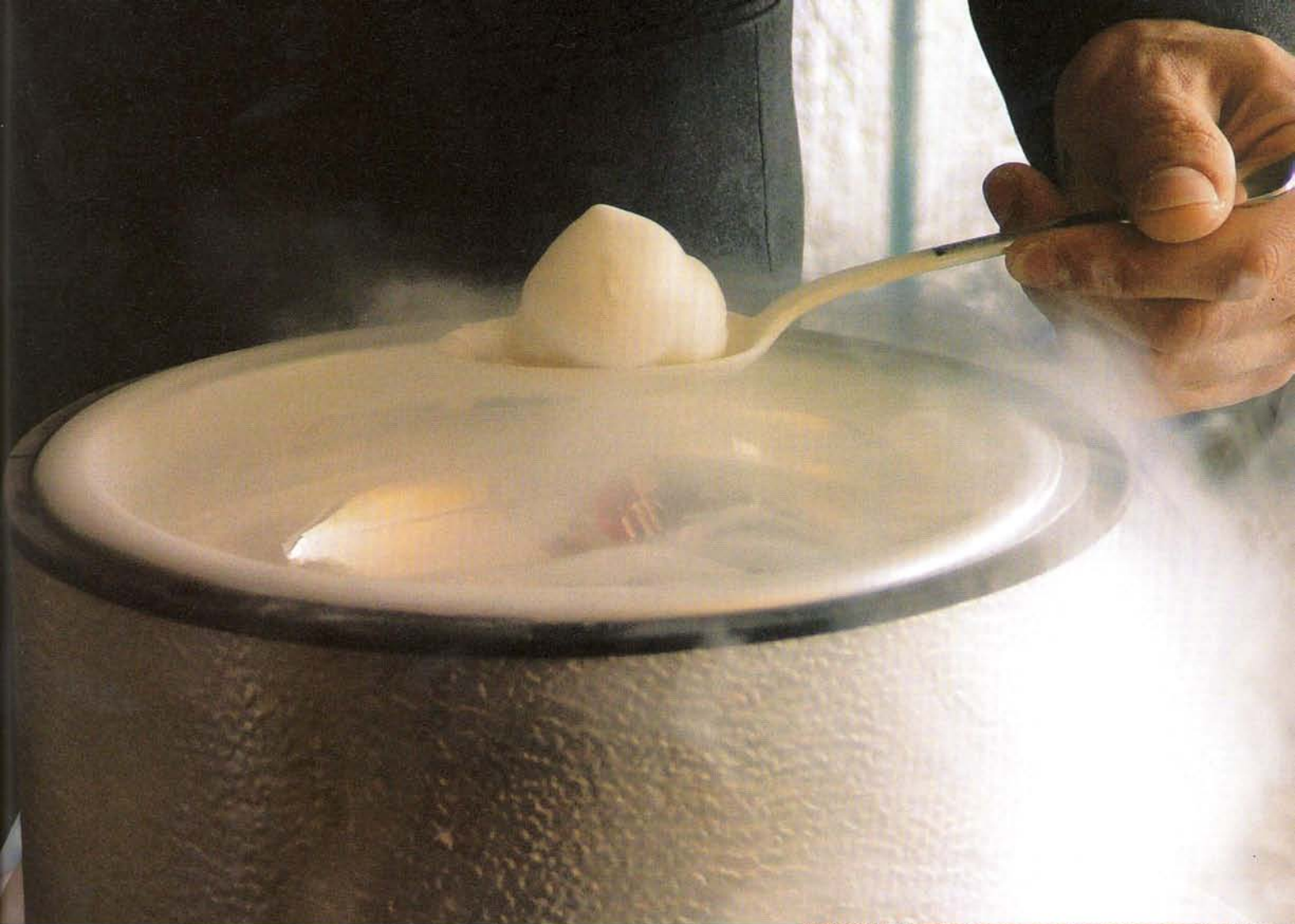
passionate about the food as the chef de cuisine.

The Fat Duck's wine list is equally impressive, combining legendary wines such as Penfold's Grange with lesser-known 'boutique' labels from Languedoc and Austria. Every detail has been meticulously considered from the Riedel glasses to the food memory suggestion card placed on the table to steer the conversation towards the diners' first and favourite food memories of childhood.

On our arrival we were greeted with a complimentary glass of Champagne. We felt right at home with the air of hedonistic philosophical conviviality that permeated the room. Having perused the menus – three course table d'hote lunch £35, three course a la carte lunch £65, sixteen course tasting menu £90 – we decided to experience the kitchen's full bounty.

The meal experience was a combination of both arts and science; theatrical, sensual, psychological, erudite and at times whimsical. To cleanse the palate the first course consisted of a chilled mousse of green tea, lime and vodka prepared at the table by dipping a spoonful into a vat of liquid nitrogen. This theatrical performance attracted the gaze of neighbouring tables, and, to add to the show, on eating the frozen ball a shot of cold vapour, like a dragons breath, rushed down one's nostrils. The tannins in the tea combined with the lime's acidity purged one's mouth of any residual substance that might impinge ones appreciation of the forthcoming meal. A glass of Fino Sherry accompanied the first few courses but an initial hidden course, jelly of beetroot and orange, arrived challenging our visual preconceptions. Two jellies were presented, one orange and the other ruby red. The orange jelly tasted of beetroot (golden beet) and the ruby jelly tasted of orange (blood orange).

Fresh oyster with passionfruit jelly, horseradish cream and lavender was both visually dramatic and sensuously divine combining the saltiness of the oyster with the sweetness in the fruit and the savoury lavender. This was followed by Pommery grain mustard ice cream with red cabbage gazpacho. The sharpness of the cabbage was mellowed by the savoury ice and designed to cleanse the palate yet





again. Completing our first grouping of dishes, inspired by Alain Chapel, was a jelly of quail (jellied consommé), pea purée, cream of langoustine topped with parfait of foie gras served with toast.

A glass of 2003 Austrian Grüner Veltliner Smaragd Achleiter Prager hailed the next chapter of this gastronomic adventure. I noticed one lady at a nearby table of four declining this course, no doubt frightened by the title 'Snail Porridge'. This masterpiece of a dish combines colour (bright green: parsley), risotto-like texture (using porridge oats) and flavour (garlic, fennel, Jabugo Ham) not to mention the snails. Finely shaved fennel and strips of ham produced from acorn fed Iberico pigs using a painstaking two-year process elevate this understated dish to a classic. The Grüner Veltliner was adequately sharp to work with the strong flavours and cleanse the palate simultaneously.

Every nuance within the meal has been carefully conceived. Nothing is accidental. Heston Blumenthal's philosophy is not about trying to achieve awards but simply to follow his passion. He is self-taught from 12 years of experimentation on classical dishes inspired by American scientist Harold McGee, who preferred the science of everyday life to studying black holes. Cooking, according to McGee, is applied chemistry and probably the first chemists on earth were cooks. His books 'On Food and Cooking' and 'The Curious Cook' are seminal texts on the BA (hons) Culinary Arts programme. At the Fat Duck meat is cooked at low temperatures for long periods to break down collagen without becoming dry or rubbery. Milk is used in the ice creams because the high fat content in cream coats the tongue and reduces taste perception. The practice of small portions, but frequent courses, is underpinned scientifically. Once

you start chewing, flavour molecules fly up your nose sending electrical signals to the brain. After a while the brain gets bored as you continue to eat and requires stimulation. Food doesn't lose its flavour as you eat, but one's perception of the flavours simply reduces. A good meal has been compared to lovemaking, you remember the beginning and the end, but the middle bit often remains a blur! Blumenthal's food could be considered 'tantric' as it aims continuously to stimulate.

The roast foie gras, chamomile, almond fluid gel, cherry and Amaretto jelly is paired with a 2002 Côteaux du Languedoc St. Drézéry Chateau Peuch-Haut. A blend of Grenache blanc, Marsanne and a touch of Viognier, this wine's oily texture is a delightful accompaniment for foie gras. To quote the sommelier, it is 'a wine you enjoy to pour, watch and listen to'. I told you these guys are passionate! The most perfect match of wine and food I have yet experienced came next with the marriage of a 2002 Mosel Riesling, Sybille Kuntz Gold-Quadrant with the sardine on toast sorbet, ballotine of mackerel 'invertebrate', marinated daikon and salmon eggs. While the squeamish neighbouring lady powdered her nose her dining partners instructed the waiter not to announce future dishes, as she was more likely to enjoy them in blissful ignorance. The thought of sardine on toast sorbet might have unfairly curtailed many diners' enjoyment of what in fact was a

"While the squeamish neighbouring lady powdered her nose her dining partners instructed the waiter not to announce future dishes, as she was more likely to enjoy them in blissful ignorance..."



From left: Sardine on toast sorbet, ballotine of mackerel 'invertebrate', marinated daikon and salmon eggs; Fresh oyster with passionfruit jelly, horseradish cream and lavender

marvellous dish. The 'sorbet' resembled a chilled fish paté in texture and the mackerel served with pickled ginger was divine. On sipping the wine the dishes' flavours re-awakened in the mouth like an organoleptic explosion. Our waiter who had sampled the tasting menu with wine the previous week (a yearly perk for all staff) mirrored my delight in this magical food and wine pairing.

The second fish course was salmon poached at 42 degrees Celsius with liquorice served with asparagus, pink grapefruit and 'Manni' olive oil. We were advised not to delay in tasting since it was served warm. Coated in dark liquorice, the salmon barely poached, resulted in a most delicate dish. Vanilla mayonnaise and crisp fried asparagus balanced the offering. A 2000 Italian IGT red from Verona 'La Grola' had liquorice notes; it was not a pure Valpolicella thanks to the addition of Cabernet Sauvignon to the usual trio of Corvina, Rondinella and Molinara.

The final savoury course was sweetbread cooked in a salt crust with hay, celeriac purée, lemon thyme and cabbage. In my eyes this was the weakest dish so far but Ian Mannix, my dining companion, liked it as it helped him overcome his fear of sweetbreads. Two pre-desserts - a white chocolate disk topped with caviar and a mini ice cream cone in honour of Mrs Agnes B. Marshall (1855-1905), the queen of ice cream - heralded the final act in this gastronomic drama. Both the Mango and Douglas Fir Purée with blackcurrant sorbet paired with a 1989 Riesling, and the Macerated 'mara des bois' strawberries with black olives purée and pistachio scrambled egg paired with Opitz One Straw Wine from Austria were excellent.

The dish that really shook the culinary world was the bacon and egg ice cream, served with the breakfast-themed dessert. A box of parsnip flakes

arrives with a bowl and a jug of warm parsnip milk. The breakfast theme continues through the Pain Perdue, bacon and egg ice cream, confit of tomatoes, caramelised morels and tea jelly. More psychology, why not serve breakfast after dinner? Does it work? Personally I think it's a bit of a gimmick.

The real eye-opener came at the end when we got to visit Paul and Róisín in the kitchen. Neither of us could believe that ten chefs could produce such high quality food in such a tiny kitchen. Teamwork, cooperation and communication take on extra importance in this environment. My enduring memory is the enthusiasm and good humour of all staff. Service is extremely friendly, courteous, knowledgeable and sufficiently theatrical. The innovative kitchen and creative menus are drawing a steady following. This is not everyday dining but a mix of pure hedonism, intellectual stimulation and performance art. The ultimate test for judging this new food philosophy centres on the theory of cause and effect. After three-and-a-half hours of wining and dining and consuming copious flavour combinations, I suffered not one iota of heartburn or indigestion. Was this pure chance or careful engineering?

The principle factors differentiating Blumenthal from other chefs is his extremely scientific approach to cooking and his philosophy of challenging the customers' preconceptions by toying with flavour, childhood memories and the psychology of the meal. Part of the 'molecular gastronomy' movement started by Dr. Nicolas Kurti and Hervé This, the Fat Duck will not be to everyone's taste but every serious foodie should visit this temple of gastronomy at least once in their life. Indeed, at £155 sterling for the tasting food (sixteen courses) and wine (eight varieties) menu, few will be able to afford to become regulars. ☞