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Tom Aikens

Máirtín Mac Conlomaire visits a top London restaurant to find out whether the 'artist' must be present for the food to be fine

Authenticity in food was the theme discussed at this year's Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery. Food as art was one of many topics discussed. It was widely agreed that certain chefs, Ducasse, Robuchon, Adria, Blumenthal, Gagnaire, Keller can be considered artists. To call them cooks would be like calling Dali a mere painter or Mozart a mere pianist. Alain Ducasse, the world's most starred Michelin chef, has three-star restaurants in Paris and Monte Carlo and is associated with another seven restaurants in three continents. We debated whether the food could be considered 'authentic' if Ducasse himself was not in the kitchen? It was argued that presence is not required, for what you experience is a rendition of the artist's work, much as you experience the work of Mozart or Shakespeare.

In my recent lunch visit to Tom Aikens, the rendition was conducted by Belfast-born head chef, Dylan McGrath (ex The Commons and Peacock Alley) and restaurant manager Stéphane Réaubourg.

Tom Aikens first came to the attention of the culinary world when, aged 26, as head chef in London's 'Pied à Terre', he became the

youngest chef to be awarded two Michelin stars. He later attracted publicity for the wrong reasons when he was fired for deliberately burning an apprentice on the arm. He was re-introduced into society by a Channel 4 documentary on his new restaurant and his quest for perfection. In that programme, I was intrigued to see Aidan Byrne, previously head chef in Dublin's The Commons, working as Tom's second chef.

Stéphane, the manager, informed me that Aidan had recently left to head up the kitchens in Danesfield House in Marlow. Although tempted to try the tasting menu (£70) I decided to opt instead for the Table d'Hôte menu at £29 for three courses. On being seated I declined a glass of champagne from the champagne trolley (choice of four by the glass), accepted a bottle of still water (Evian £4.50) and perused the menu. Having chosen a scallop starter and halibut main course, I left it to the sommelier to suggest a suitable wine (by the glass) for each course. His first choice was a 2003 Pinot Blanc 'Ostertag Bariques' from Alsace. Bread arrived, and what a choice! Over the course of the meal I sampled the tapenade, bacon and onion, buttermilk and the dill bread.

The bacon and onion brioche was so light and fragrant, it seemed like the lightest mini Quiche Lorraine (fabulous). An appetiser arrived; chicken and truffle jelly with celeriac foam and brunoise of air-dried duck. A lightly set jellied chicken consommé generously speckled with truffle, topped with creamy foam, with finely diced celeriac and dried duck providing contrast in both flavour and texture indicated a confident hand in the kitchen and set the bar very high for the following courses.

My starter of roast scallop with orange and endive was well cooked and generously proportioned. The marriage of textures and flavours worked on a number of levels and was well matched by the fresh acidity of the Pinot Blanc. Service was attentive but slightly rushed, influenced perhaps by the presence of a mere eight customers in a room seating 60.

I recalled reading about Aikens confronting a customer he suspected of pilfering the heavy silver cruet set. I understand a restaurateur's frustration when expensive objects like these are 'liberated' by inebriates.

My second wine was a 2002 Californian Chardonnay from Walter Hansel's Russian River vineyard. It



was matched to halibut with fennel foam, poached oysters, shallots, and red wine jus. The wine was ripe and full bodied, well balanced with good length. The fish was perfectly cooked, slightly translucent in the centre. The complete dish – an array of pastel hues, brown (sauce), beige (oyster) and light purple (long shallots) was highly aromatic. The three oysters were barely poached and tasted divine; dill bread was employed to mop up the richly flavoured sauce.

The restaurant is renowned for its cheese trolley but I opted for the peach soup with poached peach, vanilla panna cotta, peach jelly and almond tuille. Two separate dishes arrived; a large semi-frosted glass

Opposite page from left: The dining room; a selection of dishes on offer at Tom Aikens

bowl with the soup, jelly and panna cotta, and a smaller beaker containing peach sorbet topped with a peach meringue. Flavours and textures were great but the portion size, overgenerous to a fault. I struggled to finish it. My cappuccino was top class and came accompanied by a lidded wooden bowl containing six petit fours and a toast rack-like contraption holding five varieties of tuille/ croquant (chocolate, mango, sesame, pistachio and almond). Then even more petit fours arrived; this time five freshly baked flavoured madeleines (chocolate, vanilla, lemon, ginger and almond).

The whole experience (£47.81 including service) found me

Upside

- Attentive service
- Top class food
- Excellent wine list

Downside

- Over generous dessert portions

Alternatives?

Fine Dining

The Connaught
Lindsay House
Claridges

In the Neighbourhood

Bibendum
Restaurant Gordon Ramsay

Verdict

“Top class food but would like to see the service on a busier day”

“Chefs and waiters, like actors or musicians, draw energy from a full house. This rendition was honest if slightly over-exuberant...”