

The Greenhouse - a star indeed

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What a difference a couple of years has made not just to the confidence of Antonin Bonnet's cooking at The Greenhouse but also to the more relaxed, but still precise, service supervised by General Manager Jean- Marie Moirada and sommelier Benoit Allauzen.

A meal at The Greenhouse, tucked away at the bottom of a block of flats in a quiet street in Mayfair, has always been a rather 'grown- up' affair although in recent years its entrance has also invariably been marked by a number of black, chauffeur- driven cars parked outside.

When Marlon Abela bought it from the Levin family a few years ago and subsequently lavished a great deal of capital on it the restaurant took on an even plusher feel and that has now been highlighted by a second recent redesign which picks up the colour of the restaurant's name. It's now chic, extremely comfortable and not too brash although perhaps the lighting is overly dim.

Bonnet was brought in from Morton's club in Berkeley Square, which Abela also owns, when his predecessor suddenly left and initially it was much easier to appreciate his obvious talents than to discover why he was cooking the way he did as he seemed so painfully shy. He would come out of the kitchen for as brief a time as possible, shake hands and almost scurry back in.

Today, he seems much more relaxed and on both occasions I have eaten there recently he has come out to talk to me and to those at other tables, immaculate in whites from head to toe, and stayed for almost a couple of minutes, talking and smiling and expressing an immediate delight in the fact that on both occasions we had eaten so well.

Bonnet is from Lyons and his approach is very French in its use of the primary ingredients on his menu but invariably distinguished by the clever addition of something Asian to add colour, freshness and contrast alongside. And these talents are being indulged by Abela in the pursuit of even higher standards and goals. Over dinner one of the amuse- bouches, a small green hemisphere of a bright green apple and celery juice wrapped in a coriander jelly was served on a small round crouton. On my return for lunch a few days later it was served on a ceramic artichoke leaf which obviously cost far, far more than both this and the other amuse- bouche, a tube of carrot filled with a coconut and star anise mousse, put together.

Our first meal included one very, very good first course, two sea urchins (not that common on London menus sadly) whose flesh had been scooped out and recreated with crab, some slivers of crunchy cucumber and a sea urchin mousse on the top. The kombu (a thick sea vegetable, like kelp, common in Japanese, Chinese and Korean cooking) jelly served on a side plate tasted just as intriguingly of the sea. The yuzu dressing with the diver scallops provided the same intriguing taste sensations. The Swiss chard with my main course, a fillet of brill served on the bone, was another very nice touch, as was the offer to put the petits fours into a box before we set off for an all too rare foray to the cinema (so much classier than popcorn, don't you know).

A return foray a few days later for their set lunch (£25 for 2 courses, £29 for three) brought equal satisfaction. Cornish crab came in a glass topped with broccoli and cauliflower couscous; crisp polenta with anchovy tempura and roasted vegetables (Bonnet thoughtfully provides a vegetarian main course as part of this menu, currently a green asparagus lasagne); slow- cooked hake with slightly undercooked potatoes and two very different desserts: a very rich chocolate concoction alongside a refreshing combination of finely diced, fresh pineapple, a tamarillo sorbet and a lemon zest Madeleine.

The Greenhouse's wine list has always been impressive and now with over 3,500 bins can provide as much delight for any wine lover as it does concern for the team which has to monitor it and any accountant who might be involved. Its size does mean that there is plenty for everyone, particularly at the top end, but also that there are possibly a few bottles past their best. [We, for example, tasted the **Japanese white** that Denis Dubourdieu has consulted on - exotic or what? - **Ch- Ka Nuit Blanche**, a rather heavy Lebanese Marsanne, a very good **Riesling, Eclat de Gres 2001 Alsace** from Julien Meyer and a rather too oaky **Riesling Munchberg 2002** from the same producer plus a delicate **Meyer Naeckel Blauschiefer Pinot Noir 2006 Ahr** that was pretty but not as complex as the best noted recently in Germanic Pinot Noirs. Just as well we weren't reviewing *The Last Mistress*...JR]

But what has changed most about The Greenhouse, and all of the capital's top restaurants, is that for anyone paying today with euros these prices are extremely reasonable. We have got so used to London being expensive that it comes as something of a shock to realise that Bonnet's dinner menu at £60 is no more than the price of a main course at one of the top Paris restaurants of equal standing. And, of course, that these wine prices in euros look very reasonable, too.

This may not last too long. Bonnet obviously buys a great deal of his produce in France and so pretty soon he, along with other top London chefs, will have to increase his menu prices to compensate for the weakening pound. But in the interim, I would enjoy The Greenhouse's food, wine and prices.

www.greenhouserestaurant.co.uk