

Where to eat in Edinburgh

10 Aug 2011 by Nick Lander/FT

I was sitting in a pub in Edinburgh with three Scotsmen, triplets in their late twenties who fully live up to their incontrovertibly Scottish names of Diarmid, Fergus and Roderick Campbell, when the topic of the city's forthcoming Festival came up.

It's unquestionably THE best time to be in the city', Fergus commented emphatically. 'It can be chaos but it's great fun.'

As I was there to scout out some of Edinburgh's better restaurants, it occurred to me that perhaps no other city in the world brings so many visitors to their restaurateurs' front door as this Festival during the month in the year when so many other city centres are at their quietest. And then, even more thoughtfully, the Festival sets up an entire programme of artistic events that conveniently begin and end either side of lunch or dinner. By contrast, New York and London are relatively quiet in August while Paris is simply closed for business.

I was to appreciate quite how assiduously Edinburgh's restaurants cope with the lost and hungry when, despite the fact that Ondine restaurant is no more than a 10-minute walk from Waverley Station - a climb I undertook with a lone piper playing in the background - I simply could not find its front door. The response to my telephone call to say that I wanted to come for lunch but hadn't booked and was confused as to its exact location was enthusiastic and precise. 'Fantastic', came the voice at the other end, 'we're on the first floor between a Pizza Express and the Missoni Hotel'.

Once up the flight of stairs, chef/proprietor Roy Brett's passion for fish is obvious. The wallpaper in the small private dining room is of happy fish frolicking, presumably before they are caught, while just by the reception a large glass counter is stuffed with oysters interlaced with samphire.

The centre of its horseshoe bar proved just the right place to observe quite how friendly Scots can be to their neighbours, even if they are complete strangers at the outset, as well as to appreciate the generosity of the three-course £18.95 set lunch. This began with a potent smoked haddock rarebit before a brown shrimp and samphire risotto that, but for the unnecessary salad leaves on top, would not have looked out of place in Venice. But no nation other than Scotland can produce a dessert like cranachan, a combination of Scottish raspberries that are at their very best in August, cream, oats - and a touch of whisky of course.

Dinner at Mithas, which opened two months ago in Leith, Edinburgh's port and burgeoning restaurant quarter, also ended on a high note with a sorbet of Pakistani mangoes, another fruit whose season comes to an end in late August. But while Brett has to overcome the physical challenge of not being on the ground floor, Mithas's founder, Islam Mohammed, has decided to put a far more onerous and self-imposed obstacle in the way of his new restaurant's financial success: it does not sell alcohol at all.

This is the religious principle that he and his brothers have followed ever since their family opened the original Khushi's in 1947. And while this lack of what is normally any restaurant's easiest source of profit may be overcome in a mid-price restaurant that can prosper with a healthy take-away business, Mohammed's vision is very clear and very different. 'I want Mithas to be the first widely recognised Indian fine dining restaurant in Scotland', he explained to me the day after I had dinner there.

Ironically, Mithas is the result of an obviously expensive conversion from what used to be a bar/club with one section of the building annexed off, and leased to another operator to serve as a bar from which the restaurant's customers can walk through with a glass of wine or beer. There is also an off licence nearby.

The kitchen has certainly got off to a flying start. My only disappointment with the scallops served in their shells was that the naan had not yet been served to soak up the luscious coconut sauce. The chefs in charge of the tandoor oven were equally successful with monkfish, wild salmon and chicken thighs, as were those in charge of spicing and gently cooking the lamb and chicken curries. If Mithas is to be truly distinctive, however, Mohammed has to find a way to get the service to be more relaxed. However good the food may be, hearing the word 'enjoy' every time a plate of food is served swiftly becomes a deterrent to pleasure rather than an inducement.

Pleasing their customers must be the driving force behind Paul Wedgwood and Lisa Channon's roles at Wedgwood, set

in a historic building in Canongate, part of the Royal Mile, because physically their working areas could not be more constrained.

The tables are cheek by jowl on two floors; the kitchen is smaller than that in many homes; and the 'pass' that links the two is barely wide enough for two plates at any one time. As I waited for my guests, I couldn't take my eyes off the area where seemingly headless chefs were swiftly loading plates from left and right and then quietly calling 'Service' for them to be dispatched to the requisite tables.

The draw on a Saturday lunch has to be one of the UK's best-value menus at £14 for three courses. This included two cleverly balanced first courses, a velouté of carrots and sweet potato and a salad of poached salmon with crayfish, cucumber and a Bloody Mary mayonnaise, the same colour as the drink but much less powerful. Then a main course to delight any vegetarian: Scottish chanterelles, those yellow, pale-gold wild mushrooms that are also in season now, sautéed with thin wedges of new potatoes and spinach in a tarragon cream. Finally, of course, cranachan for dessert.

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Ondine www.ondinerestaurant.co.uk

Mithas www.mithas.co.uk

Wedgwood www.wedgwoodtherestaurant.co.uk