

Four London stalwarts

5 Apr 2012 by Nick Lander/FT

In the fortnight preceding my recent stay in hospital and a convalescence at home that will regrettably force me to spend at least a couple of months away from this column*, I took a hard-line approach to the choice of restaurants when I was due to meet business colleagues.

Whenever there was a slight hesitation in their voice, I simply said that I would meet them at one of the following four restaurants and that I would make the booking. I was not in the mood for surprises or disappointments.

None ensued. In every aspect of their very different characters The Giaconda Dining Room in Soho, Great Queen Street in Covent Garden, Zucca in Bermondsey Street and Galvin Bistrot de Luxe on Baker Street lived up to their reputation and the niche they seek to occupy. And in each instance they provided me with a distinct memory of quite how gratifying restaurants that are both privately owned and personally managed can be.

These two factors unite the choice of these particular four restaurants although I did not appreciate at the outset that I would also be enjoying them in size order: from very small to medium.

Certainly, nothing could get smaller than **The Giaconda Dining Room** where Australian chef Paul Merrony cooks in a white hat and apron and his partner Tracey controls the 25 customers that the restaurant can seat when it is full. One kitchen porter and one waiter try to keep pace with their respective bosses.

Merrony's menu turns his isolation, and a very cramped kitchen, to advantage by offering a wide range of dishes whose preparation comes from each section of his stoves and where each main course is served fully garnished so he does not have to bother with fiddly side dishes. A crumble of creamed shallots, mushrooms and horseradish came from the oven; he had already smoked his own salmon that came with grated celeriac as another starter; Brill wrapped in ham was finished in the oven; spaghetti with crab was tossed in the pan.

But best of all, the restaurant's cramped size reverberates with two sensory delights that bigger restaurants cannot match: the allure of the cooking aromas and the delighted comments overheard at other tables.

These two emotions would almost be matched at **Zucca** as it is not that much bigger but the noisier acoustics do make eavesdropping particularly tricky. But their food, and at our meal the wines by the glass, more than compensated for this.

Zucca's culinary attractions are its range of great-value first courses, particularly a combination of warm purple sprouting broccoli topped with salted ricotta; its pasta dishes, especially corda, twirled lengths coated in a pork ragu with just the right hint of chili; and an excellent pastry chef producing panna cotta with rhubarb and a moist blood orange cake.

And while Zucca's wine list has always been a bonus, their red wine of the week on our visit was Ornellaia 2007 at only £15 a glass. Only missing from this quasi-Florentine setting were views of the magical Duomo.

My views at **Great Queen Street** were far more mundane - through shelves to chefs working away and of a blackboard that offered two alluring dishes: a jellied egg as a starter and a shoulder of venison for two as a main course. Both these dishes are typical of the culinary talents of the team that initially opened The Anchor and Hope, near Waterloo, then renovated this former pub before weaving the same magic on The Magdalen Arms in Oxford and The Canton Arms in Lambeth.

The jellied egg caught my eye and whetted my appetite. Served in a small glass, it had been cooked and then set in a clear consommé and was served with capers, cornichons and crisps, making a dish that combined technique with simplicity. Equally delicious were a dish of spaetzle noodles with black quail and mushrooms; a quail, a bird neglected by too many chefs in my opinion, here griddled and served alongside sweet and sour aubergines; and one stunning dessert, a ramekin topped with meringue, under which lurked a creamy filling laced with tangy slivers of Seville oranges.

My final pre-medical lunch, at **Galvin Bistrot de Luxe** (pictured), began with a demonstration of how brothers Chris and Jeff Galvin keep abreast of their expanding business (their latest outpost, Demoiselle, a 50-eater café/bistro, opens within

Harrods any minute). When I saw them they looked initially like a couple of businessmen in civvies, each sporting a large briefcase. But when I teased them on their ostensibly new career, both pulled down their roll neck sweaters to reveal white chef's jackets underneath.

The cooks the Galvins had confidently left in charge showed their mettle. We both started with a dish of imam bayildi, the spicy Turkish aubergine dish cooled by a spoonful of yoghurt, before moving on to a fillet of cod with a leek and potato fondue and an immaculate rendition of caramelized veal's brains served on creamy mashed potato with capers and sautéed breadcrumbs.

The only touch of sadness came when my guest revealed that he was struggling to lose two stone to get himself in trim for an operation and had to turn down dessert. We commiserated with each other and vowed to return as soon as possible.

The Giaconda Dining Room, 9 Denmark Street, Soho UK WC2H 8LS, +44 (0)20 7240 3334 www.giacondadining.com

Great Queen Street, 32 Great Queen Street, Covent Garden WC2B 5AA, +44 (0)20 7242 0622

Zucca, 184 Bermondsey Street, Bermondsey SE1 3TQ, +44 (0)20 7378 6809 www.zuccalondon.com

Galvin Bistrot de Luxe, 66 Baker Street, Marylebone W1U 7DJ, +44 (0)20 7935 4007 www.galvinrestaurants.com

* See [Situation \(temporarily\) vacant: restaurant critic](#)