

When the view is not enough

18 Oct 2012 by Nick Lander/FT

As I watched six waiting staff descend simultaneously on the service table to which our two main courses had just been delivered from the kitchen at Chrysan, a new Japanese restaurant close to London's Liverpool Street station, I was intrigued, then pained and finally professionally disquieted.

The same sentiments had surfaced at the end of two other dinners at new restaurants that have opened on the other side of Liverpool Street.

Sushisamba and the Duck & Waffle occupy respectively the 38th and 40th floors of the new Heron Tower. Although my disappointment here was somewhat tempered by extraordinary views and, in particular, by the unalloyed pleasure of looking down from table 1061/1 at the Duck & Waffle on to the Tower of London far below.

While the emergence of these restaurants is obviously connected to the importance of financial services in the capital, it is also linked to two other significant social changes.

The first is that today so many more people are actively choosing to live in what is now the fashionable East End. This means that there is now demand for restaurateurs to open over the weekend and that they are busy.

The second is the significant change in our drinking habits. City restaurants used to benefit hugely from what were once referred to as 'tbls' (two bottle lunches). This practice has definitely vanished but it has been replaced by far more profitable bars which, with the right number of trained mixologists, will be packed from late afternoon until the early morning.

In fact, the bars at Chrysan and the Duck & Waffle served as accurate portents of what we were to subsequently experience.

The former, clearly visible from the windswept pavement of the recently created, soulless, pedestrianised Snowden Street, was deserted when we walked in and when we left two hours later. The latter was packed, noisy and frenetic but its twist on a Bloody Mary left my mouth feeling as though it had been washed out with soap.

Both Sushisamba and the Duck & Waffle are managed by Sushi London, a subsidiary of a company that already operates large sushi restaurants in New York and Florida seemingly on the principle that a combination of Brazilian, Peruvian and Japanese influences transposed to London will be better than the original interpretation. I was not convinced when I ate in their New York restaurant and I am even less so now.

It wasn't just that we found their small plates, raw dishes and samba rolls lacking in freshness and acidity but that we also found the waiting staff more interested in processing customers than looking after them. Above all, came the shock of finding we were in the hands of a Corporate Chef. The last line of the menu attributes Fernando Navas with this title. Navas may well be a nice guy and his contribution vital, but this is a statement that sets completely the wrong tone for what is an expensive restaurant.

The Duck & Waffle possesses one major advantage in its line up in the shape of its manager, Gavin McGowan Madoo (whose mother is from north-east England, and his father from the Caribbean). He is charming, enthusiastic, personable and, having watched him walk every inch of the extensive floor several times, I can only believe he is very fit.

But he and his team are let down by two factors outside their control. The first is that, as its name might suggest, a great deal of the food tastes overly sweet. This was the case with the smoked haddock scotch egg, the yellowfin tuna, and the dish that gives the restaurant its name, duck topped with a fried duck egg and mustard maple syrup. Desserts are ultra-sweet.

The wine list is also a travesty. Nobody has seen fit to even arrange the wines in any coherent order, but it is the excessive gross margins that have been applied that are really an indication that the restaurateurs believe that the views will be enough to seduce their customers into returning.

I certainly have no intention of returning to Chrysan despite my admiration for Japanese food and the distinctive pleasures of eating kaiseki meals in Kyoto, the city where this style of leaving the menu in the hands of the chef originated.

But it is symptomatic of the mistranslation that has so obviously taken place between Chrysan's partners, those who run the Hakkasan Group and chef Yoshihiro Murata, who has highly successful restaurants in Kyoto and Tokyo, that our meal here was so disappointing.

They have not had the courage of their convictions just to offer a kaiseki menu. They have been greedy in taking over such a large space rather than providing the intimacy that is inherent in this style of eating. And despite an obvious level of professionalism in the kitchen, dishes of a Japanese 'mock turtle' soup and one called 'where Kyoto meets Scotland' incorporating shiitake mushrooms and lobster failed to convince this diner.

Those behind these restaurants have failed to overcome the challenges inherent in bringing a style of cooking that may be successful 3,000 miles away to London's expanding financial district. They are certainly no competition at present for Galvin La Chapelle, L'Anima or St John Bread & Wine - all of which are no more than a stone's throw away.

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Duck & Waffle www.duckandwaffle.com; tel 0203 640 7310