

Restauration at Trinity, SW4

17 Jan 2013 by Nick Lander/FT

We set off on that long journey, from north to south London, with a lump in our throats and in the hope that Adam Byatt and his team at Trinity restaurant in Clapham would restore us to good health. They did so most effectively and enthusiastically.

The lumps were the consequence of a rite of passage. Our youngest child had finally left home that morning and while this brought certain advantages - for the first time in 30 years there would be the same number of male opinions in our house as female and the morning would not resonate to the sound of a hairdryer - there was one major, professional disadvantage.

As head chef, I had just lost my pastry chef. And, as every professional head chef knows, this is a major loss - not just because they take their dishes with them but also because no other section of the kitchen generates quite such wonderful aromas. Even if I was not allowed to taste more than what was left in the mixing bowl, our kitchen always smelt great.

The remedy began immediately. A smiling receptionist greeted us and then, in a custom I would like to see more commonly practiced, followed us to the table with the menus. We were then handed over to the care of David, an Irish waiter, who responded to my question as to where he was from with the very Irish expression, 'From Dublin, myself'.

This sense that a good time was to be had was also obvious in the faces of those around us. Even at 7 pm Trinity was more than half full. I could not help but overhear the one man at the next table, surrounded by three women, take a brief look at the menu and say, 'I only come here for the seven-course tasting menu', a sentiment to which his guests immediately concurred.

As the manager set out five champagne glasses at another table of obviously regular customers and then returned with the bottle, he was followed by Byatt, who stepped out from the kitchen to add that this was with his compliments, an excellent PR gesture for the coming year. The host responded immediately by loosening his tie and then also ordering the tasting menu for his table.

By then we were dipping two spherical fritters made from Wigmore cheese into a bowl of thick mayonnaise laced with hay and wishing we had been handed a spoon to finish off the mayonnaise. That had to wait until the subsequent arrival of their excellent rolls.

Trinity's wine list has been most thoughtfully compiled. The good range is very fairly priced; and there is a good selection by the glass and to accompany the two tasting menus. Judging by the frequency with which a waiter has to dart along the pavement in front of the restaurant to secure more bottles from a nearby cellar, the wine list is widely appreciated. As part of our cure, we treated ourselves to a bottle of J F Mugnier's Nuits-St-Georges Clos de la Maréchale from the 2009 vintage that is already drinking extremely well (£78).

The menu presented two very different challenges. The first, and one that I find increasingly common, was that the first courses seemed far more exciting than the mains. Byatt takes his seasons very seriously, evinced not just by the basket of clementines and a runny Vacherin cheese on the bar, but also an ironbark pumpkin soup, a warm salad of roast chestnuts with truffled egg, and home smoked duck with blackberries among the first courses.

There was not the same thrill about the mains. Neither salmon nor sea bream set my taste buds alight and the only other options were a venison Wellington for two, beef, or Byatt's interpretation of a salad of charred winter vegetables with walnuts and Parmesan. However, I spotted that on both the set menus there was a course described as 'Game Daily' that turned out to be a loin of venison that, once David had consulted with the kitchen, I was allowed to order.

Of the five dishes that followed, there was the discernible sense that we were in the hands of an admirable chef who sticks to his principles and has a definite and original approach. These sentiments were most appreciated in a first course of deconstructed pigs' trotters, sauce gibriche and crackling; the loin of venison with roast parsnips, diced livers and carrots; and a stunningly good spiced clementine soufflé with ginger ice cream.

But both the scallop ceviche, which also suffered from being served slightly too warm, and the salad of charred vegetables lacked acidity, that essential ingredient to bring out the very best of any dish. The ceviche would have benefited from lime, the salad from a healthy dash of balsamic vinegar.

We both, however, benefited not just from good food and wine but a genuine sense of bonhomie in the room. What impressed me most about the manner in which we, and the rest of a very busy restaurant, were served was the unflagging enthusiasm of Byatt's team.

And we returned to our quiet, empty house with our ears at least buzzing to the sound of a room packed with very happy customers.

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www.trinityrestaurant.co.uk