



**Written by**  
Nick Lander  
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## Down with tasting menus



The £95 (£85 for *FT* subscribers) that readers were asked to pay for the third FT Weekend Festival held at Kenwood House on Hampstead Heath last Saturday should have left nobody short-changed. (The second one is pictured above, and won for the FT 'Best Use of an Event to Build a News Brand' at the 2018 INMA Global Media Awards in Washington DC.)

The good and the great were all on parade. Robin and Martha Lane Fox; Julian Barnes; Lucy Kellaway; Martin Wolf; the editor Lionel Barber; US managing editor Gillian Tett; Edward Luce, the *FT*'s man in Washington en route to a conference in Tbilisi; and, jumping from stage to stage, Alec Russell, the editor of the Saturday *FT*.

The set up works so well because, once inside the extensive enclosure, everyone is free to roam. There are 8 main marquees from Tech Tonic to FT Money, How To Spend It and Food and Drink - all of which are open-sided. The acoustics could be better, although this may be a sign of

my age, and anyway you can usually stand and hear what those on the platform have to say. The rest of the space is taken up with coffee stands and of course an increasing number of food stalls selling everything from mac'n'cheese to Thai Pad Thai. The central tent is taken up with a large bookshop operated by Hatchards.

The overall purpose, given the huge costs involved in putting up and taking down the tents for what is less than 12 hours, is twofold: brand reinforcement and the opportunity for those who have the pleasure and privilege of writing for the *FT* of meeting their readers. (For me this involved catching up with Michael Fox, who had come down from Cheshire with his two sons and who used to sit in the row behind me, my late father and my late grandfather in South Manchester Synagogue more than 50 years ago!)

It is therefore incumbent on us writers to come up with an interesting range of topics to talk about. This is easier for Mission Control as she performs a solo wine tasting of six wines in what is the final slot on the stage. The disadvantage for her is that everything rests on her broad shoulders. She occupies the stage alone.

For me, the situation is somewhat easier as I am not on my own. In the first year I was joined by Daniel Morgenthau of Clipstone restaurant, Chris Ammerman of Caravan, and Cynthia Shanmugalingam, the founder of We Are Kitchenette, on the pleasures, or otherwise, of the life of a restaurateur. Last year I was joined by two chefs, Merlin Lebron-Johnson of Portland and Skye Gyngell of Spring, as we discussed the history, and skills, that necessarily lie behind the writing of any restaurant's successful menu.

This year I thought I should be more controversial and, having secured my editor Al Glimour's support, my topic for debate was 'Is this the end of fine dining?' On the panel I was joined by Pierre Koffmann, the chef who had opened The Waterside Inn in Bray before moving to London to run La Tante Claire and who more than anyone else in this country has made a plate of pigs trotters so fashionable. On my other side was chef Elizabeth Haigh, who made her name at Pidgin restaurant in Hackney and is now planning to open her Japanese-influenced restaurant Shibui some time in 2019.

The problem was that there was no real opposition to the motion. After Koffmann had opened with how awful food in British restaurants had been 45 years ago when he first arrived here – and how much it had improved since – there was very little support for the restaurants of yore.

There was some support for the notion that tablecloths, curtains and carpets significantly improve the acoustics in any restaurant but that was it. There was nobody who positively missed these more formal, and at one time essential, aspects of a fine-dining restaurant. But there were two serious observations from the audience that no sensitive restaurateur should ignore.

The first, perhaps again reflecting the average age of the audience, concerned lighting, that many restaurants are too dark and too often the customer has to resort to the torch on their smart phone before ordering.

The second complaint gathered even more support. This revolved around one man's account of a meal he had experienced in California but it could have taken place anywhere. Why, he asked me, did waiters have to 'go on' (his phrase!) once they had delivered their plates of food with their over-long descriptions? This struck a deep chord with me.

This particular encounter took place in a restaurant where tasting menus were the norm and it

was at the mention of this that the whole crowd seemed to rise in apparent unison. Tasting menus may well be the chef's ultimate expression of what he or she feels like cooking but they are certainly not very customer-friendly. (And can too often seem like endurance tests - JR)

And from a chef's perspective they are a very easy, and a very profitable, way of maximising any restaurant's income. This is because, as Pierre Koffmann astutely pointed out, once the details of the menu are fixed then there is no wastage and a certain economy of scale in purchasing the ingredients involved while the labour costs of preparing, cooking and serving its constituent parts are lower, too. So, for any chef and restaurateur, a tasting menu provides an obvious route to an easier, and more profitable, way of life.

I did not take a vote but I think if I had there would have been two obvious conclusions. Firstly, that the FT Weekend Festival warmly welcomed the end of fine dining and secondly that, equally emphatically, my audience wished to see far fewer tasting menus.

And with that I thanked my audience and I began to wonder what exactly would my subject be for the FT Weekend Festival 2020?