



Pan-Fried Hake Fillet served with warm cucumber and fennel salad, tartar-style sauce and extra virgin lemon rapeseed oil.



Chicken Liver Parfait with quince puree, toasted granola and sourdough crisps.

of fresh seafood artfully placed on crushed ice takes over the table. "Where should we start?" Katy asks, eyeing the heaped mount. I point to the Colchester oysters on the outer rim of the plate and we pick up a large shell each, spooning shallot and sherry vinegar onto the plump crustaceans before we clink them together as a toast to our decadence. They taste as if they have just been plucked from the sea, fresh and slightly sweet and we quickly return for a second round.

Working from right to left across the stand, we move on to the delicately pink strips of smoked trout fillet, the flesh firm but tender, with a delicious salty tang. We break into the selection of warm bread, swishing it through golden olive oil before savouring the rolls of soft smoked salmon that melt on or tongues.

"I love prawns," I tell Katy. "Let's go for the crab next and save them for later." She agrees, on the condition that we reserve the lobster as the finisher.

We dive into the open shell of the whole dressed Cornish crab with our cocktail forks, scooping out small piles of the delicious white and brown meat that requires no accompaniment. It's simply delicious as is, with a light smattering of breadcrumbs giving it consistency and substance.

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Below: Colchester oysters.



ALFRESCO APPEAL

AS THE TEMPERATURE RISES, SO TOO DO THE OPTIONS FOR OUTDOOR DINING. GISELLE WHITEAKER DINES ALFRESCO IN THE CAPITAL.

The American Red, Mulberry and Japanese Maple trees shiver in the early evening breeze, their vibrant green leaves framing a perfect postcard of London's rooftops. Ducks quack merrily in the meandering pond and four, spindly-legged flamingos stroll across the lawn, the orange tinge to their feathers more pronounced in the last burst of afternoon sunshine before the sun sinks below the horizon. It's hard to believe that my friend Katy and I are sitting on the terrace of Babylon Restaurant on the seventh floor, in Kensington, London.

We've long been waiting the advent of alfresco weather, and while there's still a chill to the air, the terrace is lined with heaters, keeping us toasty as we sip on South African sauvignon blanc and admire the city spread out before us. It's not just the panoramic views that capture our imagination though – it's The Roof Gardens one level below us: three gardens spanning 1.5 acres, 100 feet above London.

The Roof Gardens were designed by landscape architect Ralph Hancock and opened to the public in May 1938. They've been there ever since, a team of gardeners keeping them blooming. Seven trees remain from this original planting and the gardens have been acknowledged as a place of 'Specific Historical Interest' and given a Grade II-listing by English Heritage. We're overlooking the English Woodland, while the Spanish Garden, based on the Alhambra in Granada, Spain, and the Tudor Garden, made up of a series of courtyards, are wrapped around the interconnected edges of the building. On weekends, these are part of a bustling club and event space, but mid-week, the garden is an oasis, tucked away from the hustle and bustle below.

Despite being a long way from an ocean, outdoor dining brings the coast to mind, so we lash out on a large seafood stand. Large it is. Our eyes widen as an enormous platter

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The king prawns are worth waiting for. I close my eyes as I take my first bite of the firm flesh dipped in cocktail sauce, and immediately taste long, lazy days at the beach. Roll on summer.

Then comes the moment we've been waiting for – the lobster. Each morsel is heavenly and we eke it out, gently pulling every shred of meat from the shell and pressing on the semi-soft shell of the legs to squeeze out the last of the flavour in this perfect warm-weather meal. "That was fantastic," says Katy as we lean back and survey the mound of slowly melting ice, scattered with seafood debris and crushed lemon wedges.

It's not just the food at Babylon Restaurant that makes the meal. It's the outdoor dining; the garden surrounds; and the peace of this beautiful spot. It feels like we've drifted out of London into a haven of calm for the evening, without going very far at all – a dose of alfresco perfection. ■



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INFO

For more information about Babylon Restaurant and The Roof Gardens, part of Virgin Limited Edition, Sir Richard Branson's collection of unique retreats and luxury hotels, see www.virginlimitededition.com

Here are a few more superb alfresco dining options across the UK.

THE CROWN INN AT POOLEY BRIDGE, CUMBRIA

The Crown Inn is newly re-opened following a multi-million-pound transformation. There is a spectacular split-level outdoor terrace with views over the River Eamont, Lake Ullswater, and the Lakeland fells beyond, where you can enjoy delicious home-cooked, locally sourced dishes throughout the day. www.thwaites.co.uk



SEAFOOD & GRILL RESTAURANT AT ALDEBURGH, SUFFOLK

The AA two-rossette Seafood & Grill restaurant at Aldeburgh on Suffolk's heritage coast has a sea-facing terrace for dining outside, just a stone's throw from the beach with uninterrupted views out to sea. The focus here is on locally sourced fish and seafood, as well as Suffolk meat and game. www.brudenellhotel.co.uk



THE SCARLET AT MAWGAN PORTH, CORNWALL

Built to the highest eco standards, and overlooking the golden sands of Mawgan Porth, The Scarlet's alfresco dining commands one of the most beautiful views in Cornwall. Head Chef Tom Hunter creates a daily changing menu, ensuring dishes are bursting with locally sourced and seasonal ingredients, and you can enjoy the delicious wine menu as you watch the surfers below. www.scarlethotel.co.uk



THE GALLIVANT AT RYE, EAST SUSSEX

The Gallivant is a stone's throw from the sand dunes and eight-mile beach at Camber, where you can watch some of the best kite surfers in the world or kick back and soak up some rays. The outdoor terrace at The Gallivant is beautiful or you can order a Gallivant picnic hamper and head into the sand dunes for a truly al-fresco experience. Everything is supplied; cool box, cutlery, glasses, napkins, even a rug and a Frisbee. www.thegallivant.co.uk



MILK CHOCOLATE PAVE WITH PEAR COMPOTE

By Kate Malcom, Pastry Chef at Babylon Restaurant.

METHOD

For the base

Cream the butter and sugar until pale and fluffy before adding the egg. Sieve the gluten-free flour and cocoa powder together and gradually add it into the butter, sugar and egg mix until a soft dough is formed. As the flour is gluten-free, the dough will not need to be rested in the fridge. Press the dough onto the base and sides of the tart or flan case to form a crust. Bake in the oven at 180°C for 12 minutes until golden, then leave to cool.

For the chocolate pave

Whisk the egg yolk and sugar together until the mixture becomes light and fluffy and doubles in size. Bring the milk and cream to the boil in a pan. Take off the heat and add the egg yolk and sugar mixture. Put the pan back on a low heat and stir constantly until the mixture comes to 84°C or coats the back of a spoon. Remove from the heat and add the milk chocolate. Place gelatine in cold water and once soft squeeze out any excess water and add the gelatine sheets to your chocolate mixture. Stir until the gelatine has dissolved and the chocolate has melted. Pour the pave mixture into the cooled chocolate base and place in the fridge to set for a couple of hours or overnight.

TO SERVE

Poached pears

Peel and dice the pears. In a pan, bring water, lemon juice, sugar and star anise to a simmer. Add the chopped pears to the pan and simmer until pears are cooked. Use this compote to accompany the milk chocolate pave.

INGREDIENTS

Chocolate gluten-free base

- 140g butter
- 100g caster sugar
- 1 egg
- 340g plain gluten-free flour
- 70g cocoa powder
- 12 inch tart or flan case

Chocolate pave

- 340g cream
- 125g milk
- 85g egg yolk
- 45g sugar
- 210g good quality milk chocolate
- 3 x sheets bronze leaf gelatine

Poached pears

- 4 x pears
- 180ml water
- 20ml lemon juice
- 100g golden caster sugar
- 1 star anise

We suggest adding crushed Maltesers to garnish the top of your pave as this has a similar flavour and adds a pleasant crunch.

In the restaurant this dessert is served with a barley malt ice cream. As barley malt can be difficult to find in your local supermarket, we suggest adding crushed Maltesers to garnish the top of your pave as this has a similar flavour and adds a pleasant crunch.

