

THE ACT OF DINING

IN RECENT TIMES, DINING HAS BECOME ABOUT MORE THAN MERELY SATIATING THE APPETITE. WHILE MANY RESTAURANTS TURN EATING INTO AN EXPERIENCE, FEW PRESENT IT AS A THEATRICAL PERFORMANCE. GISELLE WHITEAKER ENJOYS THE SHOW AT BILSON ELEVEN.

The art of storytelling is an ancient one. It transcends time, geography and culture. And a good story is remembered long after the telling. Take the tale of St Mungo, who is said to have conducted four miracles, which make an appearance on Glasgow's coat of arms. His miracles also make their way into poetry: "Here is the bird that never flew / Here is the tree that never grew / Here is the bell that never rang / Here is the fish that never swam." They are further manifested on the plate I have before me.

I'm sitting opposite my mother Judy in the cosy dining room of Bilson Eleven, in the suburb of Dennistoun just east of Glasgow city centre. From the outside, it's difficult to tell that this iconic 19th-century townhouse, lovingly restored by chef Nick Rietz and his family, is home to one of Glasgow's finest dining experiences. The magnificently moustachioed host who ushered us in is dressed to the nines in a dapper waistcoat, hinting at the performance that is about to unfold within the eight-course tasting menu – the only choices here are five courses, eight courses and vegetarian – but the food is undoubtedly the star of the show. Even the bread is not ordinary. Presented in a bowl of warm grain representing its own ingredients, the sprouted sourdough is paired with malted butter, which hints deliciously at treacly



Amuse bouche of tomato, cheese curd, olive oil and aged balsamic.

Top: St Mungo's miracles in edible form.
Above: Beautifully presented bread with malt butter.



Bacon with pork-belly rilette and piccalilli.



Single fish with kohlrabi remoulade.



Lamb poached in Earl Grey.



Limoncello jam and lemon balm.

marmite. And the amuse bouche – tomato, homemade cheese curd, olive oil and 15-year aged balsamic – is a sign that the curtain is lifting on a dazzling spectacular.

It's here St Mungo makes his appearance. His miracles tonight take the form of chicken liver foie gras (the bird) and hazelnut brioche (the tree), with the foie gras shaped as the bell, next to a delicate scoop of herring roe (the non-swimming fish). Piled together in one delectable bite, the salty tang of the roe cuts through the creamy foie gras, while the brioche gives way in a delightful crunch. This collection of miracles is something I'd like to see again.

Next to grace our table is cured trout, paired with salted leek and wild leek bulbs and crème fraiche, topped with nasturtium leaves. The colours are vibrant, but overall, this is a subtle dish, the fish cured to perfection so it retains the fresh element, sliding pleasingly down the gullet.

"Single fish is a Glasgow term," explains our host. "It's an order of fish without the chips." In this case, the fish is cod tempura, served with a creamy kohlrabi remoulade, and peppery pickled mustard seeds. It's a long, long way from the corner chippie to this dish. Bacon is also given a makeover here. A thick-cut, juicy slab is presented with smooth pork-belly rilette and a defiantly light and bright piccalilli.

The first act concludes with lamb poached in Earl Grey, the tender pink slices served with sweet asparagus, wild garlic, and hazelnuts, and slivers of chicken skin. There's also a portion of lamb sweetbread with a rye crumb. I'm a bit hesitant on the latter, more so after googling sweetbread



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Cured trout with salted leek and wild leek bulbs, crème fraiche and nasturtium leaves.



Yuzu gel, fresh strawberries and elderflower meringue.

(thymus or pancreas). I pop it in my mouth anyway and am pleasantly surprised by the sweet notes that make sense when I research the function of the pancreas as a sugar regulator.

As to be expected, the sweet second act is somewhat shorter than the five-scene first half. It's still longer than many tasting menus, with not one, not two, but three desserts. The first is a visually stunning palate-cleanser: two orbs of Limoncello jam and lemon balm sit on a deep-green-hued plate, sprinkled with emerald-coloured bay leaf powder. The morsels have a coating the consistency of crunchy chocolate, which gives way to an icy, not-too-sweet, not-too-sour interior.

Palates duly refreshed, we move onto the penultimate dish of yuzu gel, fresh strawberries and elderflower meringue, sprinkled with matcha powder. It's somehow sweet and sour, sitting firmly on both ends of the flavour spectrum, with the strawberries at the crossroad.

It's time for the grand finale – a sweet, rich concoction of chocolate ganache and tempered chocolate, with fresh and parfait cherries and honeycomb mousse. It's a rather grand, utterly satisfying end to a dinner performance that, like the best stories, will not be forgotten. ■



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Above: Chocolate ganache with cherries and honeycomb mousse.

HERE ARE SOME DISHES FROM ACROSS THE UK WITH A STORY TO TELL

At Sapori in Leicester, Head Chef Andrea Scarpati presents seven-hour sous vide octopus – as a child in Torre del Greco he remembers seeing an old man trying to sell octopus from a bucket. The remaining ingredients are items from his mum's table and it's all dished on a chipped plate, a nod to such a plate in his mum's kitchen. www.sapori-restaurant.co.uk



The Chartwell Salad at The Montagu Kitchen, located within the Hyatt Regency London – The Churchill, celebrates the best of British produce. It takes inspiration from the National Trust's Chartwell House and Garden, alongside surrounding areas of Kent, bringing seasonal British dining from garden to city. www.themontagurestaurant.co.uk



The Alice Hawthorn Inn in the North Yorkshire village of Nun Monkton is set within the rhubarb triangle, which stretches between Wakefield, Morley and Rothwell. This is the inspiration behind the Yorkshire Rhubarb dessert, which showcases the ways rhubarb can be enjoyed, including compote, crumble and panna cotta. www.thealicehawthorn.com



The Duke of Cambridge Tart was invented in 1634 and was once the staple dessert at Cambridge's Queens' College's high table. It has faded out of the spotlight, but Tristan Welch, Chef Director at Parker's Tavern in Cambridge, has put it in pride of place on his menu. Tristan's twist sees layers of candied lemon and orange peel encased in just-baked cookie dough. www.parkerstavern.com



INFO

For more information about Bilson Eleven or to make a booking, see www.bilsonelven.co.uk