

FOOD & DRINK

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MARTIN WILLIAMS EAT, DRINK, SLEEP, REPEAT

Our top columnist's guide to the best epicurean spots in London

Last week began with a wonderfully long lunch in Bluebird Chelsea with Mirabeau founder Stephen Crook and his chief exec Richard Larkin. Everyone in the drinks business loves these guys, but I take credit for introducing the Batman and Robin of Provencal rose to each other back in 2013.

In Bluebird, the restaurant atmosphere was beyond buzzing as the royalty of Kings Road dined on seared tuna sashimi, crispy duck salad, memorable baked hake mornay and miso marinated salmon. We washed ours down with Mirabeau Rosé 2011 (£70); life felt balsmy at the hangout of the late Sir Donald Campbell (the restaurant once housed the record-breaking racing driver's London headquarters).

Next was a quick trip to Dukes Bar for martinis with the retail sector visionary William Kim, who has led Burberry, All Saints, Rapha and John Varvatos (no name but a few) to great success (admittedly this innovative genius is based in South Korea – London's loss).

William was a big M regular and he became a friend and mentor. We have travelled with our wives around Europe together on connoisseur culinary adventures. I first visited Florence two years ago, staying at his Palacio, where, under the tutorage of the late, great, Russell Norman, my wife and I visited almost all of Russell's recommended hotspots.

Thus last weekend, before I begin my role as chief exec of D&DM in April, we jetted off to Florence for some spring sun. Alas, as we landed, we walked straight into a 'code red' thunderstorm. I abandoned my optimistic belief that the hotel pool would be open for a few morning laps, instead settling the some minor epicurean pleasures.

The Villa Fiesole Hotel, a charming 19th century villa on the outskirts of the city, offers a pleasantly detached 'best of both worlds' situation: you are minutes from (yet overlook) the Basilica di Santa Maria Novella and the Ponte Vecchio, but are far enough away from the backpack-wearing tourists. Importantly, the hotel is home to Serrae, a newly crowned Michelin starred beauty of a restaurant.



SERRAE

Chef Antonello Sandi gained a Michelin star in October. On days without lightning storms, the view is to die for – not that I could see it. What was outstanding was lunch, a £65 three course menu of the chef's choosing, which was kickstarted with a pre-amuse-bouche that was like a one bite piece of art.

Next was the real amuse-bouche – a divine whipped mousse of potato with a spoon (that's fun to you and I), followed by white chocolate and vanilla, finished with truffle oil. Panna cotta followed, layers of succulent veal breast covered in a

sangiovese glaze, marinated apple, horseradish cream and beads of citrus caviar. The main course was a basil infused tagliatelle with gorgonzola with marinated pear, all sitting on a roasted hazelnut crème. Dessert was an epic interpretation of black forest gateau (the best sweet course I have eaten this year), which I greedily wished was four times as large. Petit fours followed.

All in all a great value special lunch, with outstanding service, complimented by head sommelier Felippo's matched wine, which proved from a Berlucchi Franciacorta Rose '61 (£95), into the



world of Brunello di Montalcino, Canalicchio di Sopra 2010 (£175), back to a new white grape blend in sangiovese, which matched the pasta perfectly, followed by a splendid sauternes to finish. It was refreshing to have a sommelier happy to choose wines by flavour rather than traditional colour matches.

GUCCI OSTERIA DA MASSIMO BOTTRUA

When Jamie Oliver was opening a restaurant a week, visiting his terrible chain felt like you were living in an advert for his personal brand. Massimo Bottura's Gucci restaurant is a bit like that, only much better and more expensive. This fantastically opulent dining room is clad in Gucci-branded bling: from the ice buckets to the cake stands, the door to the uniforms. Even the guest dress is in the fashion brand-like extras at the Oscars. It's a magnificent Michelin starred Gucci tea party, to which you are invited for only £250. The food is a triumph, too – Mrs Williams and I (both dressed in Vanessa Bruno and Etna, respectively) loved the pig shoulder with artichokes, the apple and mustard frangipane slice and Bottura's signature veal stuffed mini tortellini with a rich, whey cheese sauce.

RISTORANTE FRESCOBALDI

Finally to Frescobaldi, home of the finest Florentine wines. It's a restaurant so warm you enter to the sound of laughter from the kitchen, so thoughtful that the washrooms are adorned with starch, toothbrushes and hair spray (very useful for me...).

Service is impeccable and the food is excellent, particularly the pasta; we opted for varieties with ragu and lobster. However, the wines are the star of the show and sell for very reasonable 'cellar door' prices: Leonia 2013 is fizz with finesse, classic method sophistication and style (£82). Pomino Bianco Benfatto, from the foothills 20 miles south of Florence has long been my favourite Italian white (£34) and Castel Giocondo, a 2013 Brunello di Montalcino (£180) is enough to steal ones heart away from Burgundy to have an instant alliance with the sangiovese grape.

4 OpenTable picks for Mother's Day meals

1. ENGLAND'S GRACE

Fusing seasonal European ingredients with Australian flavours, England's Grace is throwing a Mother's Day heating event on 30 March. Expect a roll-call of their supercilious signature dishes, including braised lamb shoulder croquettes and a Bondi spring salad. opentable.co.uk/englands-grace-london

2. L'ESCARGOT

One of London's most fabulously styled French restaurants, L'Escargot focuses on doing the classics superbly. Don't miss their lobster bisque, snails or French onion soup. There's also a Mother's Day menu. opentable.co.uk/l-escargot-london-2

3. BACCALÀ

Close to the Square Mile on Bernersbury Street, Baccalà boasts the best of the Italian coastline, with a seasonally changing menu of seafood so fresh it practically croaks off the plate. Book for an Italian-themed Mother's Day Lunch. opentable.co.uk/baccala-seafood-and-wine-bernersbury

4. THE LIBRARY

Within the historic County Hall building on the Southbank, The Library has eye-popping views of the Thames, and retains its original period detailing from when it was a government office. Try everything on the best of British menu, and the afternoon tea is great too. opentable.co.uk/the-library-of-county-hall-london

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