

DINE OUT

XIER

📍 LONDON • XIERLONDON.COM

CHEF CARLO SCOTTO'S NEW FINE-DINING RESTAURANT SERVES CREATIVE, CLEVER AND SKILFULLY PREPARED CUISINE — ALL THAT'S MISSING IS A LITTLE RESTRAINT

This is a review about jam — in part, at least. Specifically, the overuse of it by otherwise clever chefs. And the head chef of Xier, ex-Babbo headman and Angela Hartnett-mentee Carlo Scotto, is very clever.

His new restaurant is a double-decker affair on Thayer Street in Marylebone: on the ground floor is casual-ish XR, and above it is Xier, a 38-seat, £90-a-head fine dining restaurant.

We're in the upper room, beginning our 'experience', as they call it. A piano version of *Wind Beneath My Wings* is playing on the stereo, and I'm slightly uneasy about the pair of waiting staff positioned two paces from our table. It feels like I'm a member of the Victorian aristocracy, who were forever hissing, "Not in front of the servants!" when conversation got a little fruity. And so, we find ourselves restricting our chatter to innocuous observations — about the shade of paint on the walls, for example (greyish white, in case you were wondering).

The food can be mixed and matched from two tasting menus: vegetarian and meaty. There are eight courses in all, including four that are essentially amuse-bouches. We start with a beetroot and goats' cheese canape that comes out amid a cloud of dry ice, but things properly get going with the next dish, a bowl of stracciatella cheese with taro and honey. The cheese is wonderfully creamy, but it's overwhelmed by the honey.

On that (sweet) note, we come to the jam. In short succession come three dishes that should be exquisite — they're prepared with surgical skill — but are lost in a sea of preserves and purees. Red prawn crudo in diaphanous slivers is topped by too much raspberry jam. Stupendous rose-cured salmon is ingeniously paired with foie gras, but third-wheeled by globules of rhubarb. A breaded lamb sweetbread is rich as Croesus and cooked with precision, but could have been improved with less kohlrabi jam.

The next two courses, though, are much better. Umami-rich black cod in caramel miso comes with a mini baton of asparagus, and flakes pleasingly under the fork. The beef cheek is a mound of soft meat served with bone marrow and chard.

After a Swedish cheese course, which comes with 'fizzy grapes' that seem exactly like the standard, non-fizzy variety, we come to the finale. I ask the waiter what 'sweet tooth', means on the menu. "You'll soon see," he says. We're served four plates of perfectly decent desserts: chocolate sabayon (an Italian dish made with egg yolks, sugar and a sweet wine), peanut tart, tonka ice cream and some miniature macarons. Thankfully, no jam.

There were certainly high points during my meal at Xier, but after three hours, I'm ready to leave. This is a restaurant that sets the bar incredibly high, but unfortunately doesn't quite reach it. *Tasting menu for two, without wine, £180. Samuel Muston @samuston*



THE TALBOT

📍 MALTON, YORKSHIRE • TALBOTMALTON.CO.UK

Having made a name for themselves with The Lucky Onion, an award-winning group of Cotswolds hotels and restaurants, Sam and Georgie Pearman's eagerly anticipated new foray takes them to Malton — Yorkshire's self-proclaimed foodie capital — and a 17th-century coaching inn.

Under the umbrella of Country Creatures, the Pearmans relaunched The Talbot earlier this year, imbuing it with boutique charm in the form of antique furniture and wood-paneled walls. In the dining room, head chef Robert Brittain has created a menu of comforting classics from the finest Yorkshire bounty: beetroot, rhubarb, Shorthorn beef,

Middlewhite pork and fresh fish from nearby Whitby.

A satisfying snack of mutton scrumpets with fresh, vibrant herb mayonnaise sets the tone. Next, a perfect pie houses big chunks of gamey venison within its thin pastry shell and is served with velvety smooth mash and buttered greens, all doused in gravy. But it's nothing compared to pudding (it's definitely not 'dessert' in these parts): a superb steamed ginger sponge drenched in butterscotch sauce and double cream. On this evidence alone, Malton's title as a regional culinary capital is secure. *Three-course meal for two, with wine, around £100. Joel Porter @joelwporter*

ORASAY

📍 LONDON • ORASAY.LONDON

I've never been one to take recommendations. My friend, however, isn't quite so stubborn, and insists we listen to the waitress's suggestions. Which is lucky, because she's right on the money, from the wine (a smoky South African sauvignon) to dessert (a fragrant cardamom and vanilla rice pudding served on beautifully tangy rhubarb).

With chef-restaurateur Jackson Boxer (of London's Brunswick House and St Leonards) running the show, we're in safe hands. The menu at his slick new Notting Hill joint is a celebration of the sea, and the best of the small plates is a single Isle of Mull scallop. Served in tiny pieces, with shiitake and vin jaune sauce,

it's creamy and sweet, with a gentle umami hum from the mushroom. I also order the brill crudo, which swims in a pool of lusciously red blood orange but could do with a touch more sharpness to really set it off.

While the halibut main, with crisp skin and just the right amount of wild garlic, is beautiful, it's another of the waitress's tips that steals the show. The roast cauliflower with spring greens, almonds and dill is so much more than the sum of its parts. Sweet, caramelised and buttery, it's a dish I'd happily eat again for dessert — along with that rice pudding. *Three-course meal for two, with wine, around £90. Nicola Trup @nickytrup*



BONNIE BADGER

📍 GULLANE, EAST LOTHIAN • BONNIEBADGER.COM

I'm drawn to dessert before I even glance at the rest of the menu; the meringue with sea buckthorn and yoghurt catches my eye. Sea buckthorn grows thick along this stretch of East Lothian coastline, so it's right up Bonnie Badger's street — in both senses.

This combined hotel, pub and restaurant is a new venture from Tom Kitchin, whose eponymous Edinburgh establishment holds a Michelin star. Here, though, local chef Matthew Budge is at the helm. The menu is neither fussy fine dining, nor pub grub — it's something in between: warm and cosy, and made using the best Scottish produce.

Co-owner (and Tom's wife) Michaela Kitchin oversaw the restoration of the property, and her Scandi-inspired style is everywhere, from the

snug bar to The Stables restaurant. It's here that I tuck into a starter of haggis, neeps and tatties; the earthy haggis bonbon is spiced with pepper, and the elegant curls of lightly pickled swede slice through the rich, silky pomme puree.

The main — crisp-skinned hake with a lemony broth of shrimp and mussels — is a perfect taste of the sea, but the pud is the real winner. The sea buckthorn berries, mouth-puckeringly tart when raw, are sweet and citrusy, served as dots of jelly atop balls of apple. Cracking into the meringue reveals a creamy yoghurt and buckthorn filling.

With bedrooms upstairs and food this delicious, I'm sold — I'll be moving in. *Three-course dinner for two, with wine, around £100. Ella Buchan @ellabuchan*