

Review – Merienda

There are very few people in the world who have a better nature than my dear Daddy. For most of my upbringing he endured an all female household and when we eventually got a male Golden retriever I selfishly named him Humphrey. This gave my long suffering father much opportunity to excessive his most macho of voices when Humphrey would be called back from yet another humiliating misdemeanour in the local park.



Had my dad a pound coin for every, lift, diy demand or selfish errand request on my part, he'd be a wealthy man indeed. And yet he's a pretty cheerful and happy fellow who has endured the whims and fancies of me and my mother with stoic good humour and rare complaint.

So it felt fitting to treat dad to an extra special pre Father's Day lunch. My dad is a 'going out' kind of person, who instilled in me a joy of not only good food but an appreciation of atmosphere. His only gripes appear to be his pint of IPA being too cold and he has some pretty strong views when it comes to beer glassware but apart from that he enjoys wherever he goes.

I'd been keen to try a proper lunch at Merienda, an elegant and charming restaurant in the heart of Stockbridge. It was a glorious day and dad looked quite the dapper gent, resplendent in tweed.

Merienda is a small but well laid out dining room with the tiniest of kitchens and even a mini indoor garden where they grow their own microherbs. Although we were the first to arrive for a lunchtime sitting the music is relaxing and it feels like there is an energy about the place.



Sections of the menu are divided into Merienda Staples, Farms and Pastures, Rivers and Seas, Field and Gardens and Sweetness. Staples aside, main dishes range from £5-8.50 and its suggested we would get through eight between us. If a menu ever read like food porn, this is it. For a small and intimate establishment there's a generous amount of choice. The menu changes with the seasons too so it wouldn't be difficult to frequent regularly and have a different dining experience each time. The idea is you have a 'tasting menu' but choose the courses yourself. However we fancied a surprise so asked our host and chef Campbell Mickel to do the honours and he assured us 'dealer's choice' was a popular option.

We began with Sun Dried Tomato Focaccia with Basil Oil and Aberdeen Angus Carpaccio, Aged Pecorino and Vinaigrette Raffaelli. Campbell tells us the 'Raffaelli' is a gesture to the restaurant he commis cheffed in that he half inched the recipe from. Very lovely it is too. And the prettiest, dishes just keep on coming.

Olive Oil Poached Halibut, Crispy Pancetta, Grapes, Sherry Sauce with Cauliflower Beignets with Spinach Emulsion and Aged Parmesan, all perfectly cooked, full of flavour and just enough to satisfy yet not ruin the anticipation of the next dish.

Tobermory Oak Smoked Trout, Scorched Cucumber and Gel, Creme Fraiche and Dill Powder followed and Campbell explains he keeps the trout sliced thickly to appreciate it's buttery texture. This is indeed sensual eating at its best. Whipped Feta, Toasted Salted Pecans, Roast Beetroot and Broad Beans was 50 shades of fromage for me.



Seared Scottish Asparagus, Lemon and Honey Emulsion followed, then Candied Lemon and Black Olive Chicken with Plum Tomatoes. The richest dish was saved till last: Red Wine Braised Ayrshire Pork Belly, Cannelini Bean and Shallot Puree. The only way I'd find this menu more alluring is if Michael Gambon read it to me.

We finish with an Apple Tarte Tatin with Cinnamon Creme Anglaise and a Rhubarb Pavlova. The meringue is just the right combination of chewy and crisp with the lightest of cream and aromatic fruit. The Tatin is rich, yet light and unusually easy to negotiate, as I often find the pastry on such dishes

in need of a chisel to eat.

Every dish in Merienda is incredibly well cooked. Not for nothing does the Campbell find his Exec Chef Cuisine business in demand for the most bespoke of events. The key is there's no over gilding of a Lily. Campbell knows how to put exquisite flavours together but also knows when to stop. By trying not to be too clever he ends up with top marks.

This was truly one of the best meals I've ever eaten. We enjoyed the relaxed, rather cheerful atmosphere and in the age of the chain restaurant it was a real treat to get to know the chef. Everyone ought to have a restaurant they feel a valued regular in and here I'd say you'll probably reach that status by the end of the first course. And what a lovely time we had. We enjoyed the relaxed form of lunch, ate just enough and for once had a tasting menu meal that wasn't stuffy but great fun.

To sum up the food and feel of Merienda: top quality, great to look at and with not a whiff of pretension. I could be describing my dear old dad himself.

Merienda

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