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The Square Is All About Food -- What a Relief: Richard Vines

By Richard Vines

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March 2 (Bloomberg) -- The Square isn't the kind of restaurant to set the pulse racing -- until you see the menu.

This Michelin two-star venue, one of only five in London, is housed on the ground floor of a commercial building across the road from Stella McCartney's shop. The box-shaped room was refurbished last year, and is understated apart from the splashes of color provided by abstract paintings by Deborah Lanyon.

Wooden floors and bare walls serve to amplify conversations so that, even with well-spaced tables, you can struggle to hear what your guests are saying across the starched white tablecloths. Apart from the pictures, the most striking designs are on the plates, which the Square inherited from Marco Pierre White's Hyde Park Hotel. These bear early-20th-century Russian designs.

The menu, which changes daily, is a treat for lovers of fine dining who enjoy dishes such as poached Irish rock oysters with seawater and squid-ink jellies, Oscietra caviar, cucumber and chives; and leg of Pyrenean milk-fed lamb roasted with bay leaves, with a fricassee of winter vegetables and truffle-creamed potato.

The chef is Philip Howard, 40, who owns the Square with Nigel Platts-Martin. The pair also owns the Ledbury, a Michelin-starred venue in Notting Hill with a promising chef, Brett Graham. Platts- Martin is also behind the Glasshouse and La Trompette, as well as Chez Bruce, another popular London eatery.

Friendly Flavors

Lunch at the Square costs 30 pounds (\$59) for three courses and is something of a bargain for such high-quality cooking. The only drawback is that there are only two options per course, which may be difficult if you claim allergies. I'm only allergic to healthy food and small portions, so no problem there.

I started with smoked-haddock risotto with mussels, soft-boiled quail's egg and light curry foam. Howard says he thinks that diners prefer familiar, friendly flavors at lunchtime.

He cooks the rice in leek stock made with the skin from the smoked haddock. The foam is made by sweating onions with bay leaf and some mango for sweetness, then you put in curry spices and cover with double cream before using a pressurized whipper. Howard adds slices of blanched celery for freshness and crunch. The mussels go in right at the end of cooking. It's a lovely dish.

My main was roast mallard with a tarte fine (that's a tart to you and me) of caramelized endive and raisin puree. The raisins are soaked for a couple of days in Pineau des Charentes. The endive is cooked in butter and then sprinkled with sugar, and Canadian Minus 8 wine vinegar is added, followed



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by orange juice. The endive is cooked on puff pastry and baked with icing sugar. The dish has a warmth and sweetness that's great for a winter day.

The other options were a starter of ballotine of chicken with salt-cured foie gras and truffled coleslaw; and a main of fillet of John Dory with crab, spring onions and cucumbers.

Pawpaw and Kiwi

Dessert offered a choice between pain d'epice soufflé with prune and Armagnac ice cream and a gratin of tropical fruit with lime ice cream. I tried the latter, which consisted of pawpaw, mango, kiwi and pineapple dressed in lime syrup and glazed with a simple sabayon (sweet sauce) finished with lime.

For all the care and thought that goes into lunch, it's simple compared with the dinner menu, which offers as many as 10 choices per course and costs 65 pounds for three. And, of course, there are the usual Michelin-style giveaways.

At the Square, these include canapes such as an anchovy straw, mimolette (cheese) shortbread; a cone of foie gras foam; a vacherin risotto ball; and smoked-salmon roulade with pickled cucumber. The amuse gueule was game jelly with crushed butternut squash and warm bacon foam, with bacon and puff pastry feuilleté.

There was a pre-dessert of vanilla yogurt with rhubarb and a warm vanilla beignet, and the petit fours included poached pineapple with hibiscus jelly; poached apple with vanilla and bay jelly; and lemon-and-lime Swiss rolls on a stick.

Leeks in a Row

I haven't actually mentioned the meal itself, when I had a mille-feuille of terrine of foie gras and poulet de Bresse and celeriac, beautifully presented with a row of grilled baby leeks parallel with lines of chicken-liver cream.

My main was slow-cooked guinea fowl on a bed of hand-rolled tagliatelle with a sauce containing juices from the bird, with tarragon, pine nuts and parmesan jelly. It was full of rich flavor. It just left room for thyme-and-orange soufflé with bay-leaf ice cream and rosemary-and-citrus macaroons. And petit fours.

The wine list is impressive and not entirely outrageous. The Chassagne-Montrachet les Chenevottes 1er Cru 2003, from one of the best vineyards of the Cote de Beaune, is good value at 15.50 pounds a glass. It's full bodied, with complexity and structure, a honey-gold hue and the well-developed buttery smoothness of a great Chardonnay, as a wine-loving guest happily described it.

The Square won its first star in 1994 and the second in 1998. Howard says he is "absolutely" going for a third. It shows.

The Square, 8-10 Bruton Street, London W1J 6PU. Tel. +44-20- 7495-7100 or go to <http://www.squarerestaurant.com/>.

The Bloomberg Questions

How much? Tasting menu is 80 pounds.

Sound levels? Can be noisy.

Special feature? Original art.

Private room? Yes.

Date place? No.

Will I go back? Yes.

(Richard Vines is London food critic for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

To contact the reporter on this story: Richard Vines in London at rvines@bloomberg.net.

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