

Restaurant review

The InterContinental, London W1

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A hotel on Park Lane has always been the ambition of the ship or steam iron beginning that long odyssey from the Old Kent Road, but these days it also appears to be the dream of the thrusting young chef. Recently, Chris Galvin made the move from his brilliant bistro in Marylebone (Baker Street, more precisely, but until Waddington's brings out a Sherlock Holmes special edition, that won't help this tiresome Monopoly theme a bit) to Windows On The World, that fabled magnet for portly Lebanese arms dealers and their 19-year-old Belarussian "nieces" atop of the Park Lane Hilton. And now Theo Randall, for more than a decade head chef at the River Cafe, has opened up at the InterContinental.

You needn't be the Chancellor to appreciate how frustrating a decade doing all the hard work without getting the recognition must be, and to understand the lure of the spotlight. Even so, to go from comparative obscurity straight to Park Lane is to take a chance, because hotel dining rooms on this charmless avenue tend to achieve an aura of corporate soullessness that swallows everything in its path like a marbleised black hole. I didn't like Galvin's place, great cook though he is, and the idea of Randall offering posh rustic Italian in so garish a building seemed irritatingly oxymoronic and inevitably doomed.

In fact, as any reader familiar with this column's soothsaying may have guessed, it is a triumph. The vast, rectangular room is gently lit, psychedelic murals lend it a splash of life and the autumnal colour scheme (tan banquettes, distressed-effect russet walls and so on) adds warmth and cosiness. "Very chocolaty," was my friend's verdict. "This actually feels like a restaurant, not a converted ballroom." Even the extreme ennui of a sommelier who seemed far too weighed down with weltenschmerz to recommend a wine was a refreshing change from the gruesome over-attentiveness that often plagues such places. The moment we tasted some amazingly good breads, especially a glorious, garlicky bruschetta, we knew we were in for a treat.

So it proved. My starter of agnolotti stuffed with slow-cooked veal, partridge, pancetta and Parmesan was as delicate and delicious a pasta dish as I've had in ages, and my friend was besotted with her pan-fried squid with borlotti beans ("from Lamon", the menu informed us - and who doesn't sigh with relief to know the provenance of their beans?),

anchovy, parsley, rocket and a decent chilli kick. "It's amazing to get that much depth of flavour into squid, which is a bugger to cook," she enthused. "It can easily go as rubbery as a condom."

With this echo of Fanny Craddock fresh in the ears, the plates were removed and the lights dimmed, raising the unnerving prospect of Shirley Bassey descending a staircase to sing to us. However, the lights were restored in time for us to appreciate the prettiness of the main courses. "So beautiful to look at," said my friend of her wood-roasted Anjou pigeon on bruschetta with lentils and cavalo nero. "And so rich. It's quite bitter and gamey, and tastes like it had a proper life, this pigeon. Maybe it could use something to leaven it a bit, like a squeeze of lemon, but it's perfectly cooked and wonderfully tender."

My roast rack of lamb was marginally undersalted, but the quality of the meat justified the price, and it was served an alluring deep pink and came with a glorious medley of wood-roasted beetroots, carrots, Jerusalem artichokes and celeriac - a simple but magnificent dish.

At this point the lungs were screaming for attention, so we went off to the bar, passing the gleamingly new and strangely calm open-plan kitchen, for puddings (fantastic cheese and a fine, if over-crumby, chocolate cake), cigarettes and a couple of digestifs. It was evening by the time we left (it was judged time to go when I had to be physically dissuaded from approaching a passing diner to ask after a couple of ground-to-air missile launchers), but it's a mark of Randall's success that we came very, very close to staying on for dinner.