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# Theo Randall at the InterContinental 1 Hamilton Place, London W1

## InterContinental drift

By Thomas Sutcliffe

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It's hard not to feel sorry for a cast when box-office sales are going badly, obliged by professional duty to pitch their passion over ranks of empty seats. And since restaurants are a kind of theatre there's a certain melancholy in arriving at Theo Randall at the InterContinental to find that we're sharing the big elegant room with the merest handful of fellow diners. Our waiter is feeling so bad about it that he actually apologises for the ambience: "We had 90 covers in here last night," he says wistfully, as if mystified by the public's fickle affections. It really can't be the reviews that are responsible either - one fellow critic is already on record as saying that the meal he ate here was the best he'd had all year. And Randall has a lot of credit in the bank for his cooking at the River Café, where he acquired his taste for Italian regional food. Perhaps it's our timing - just a day or two shy of Christmas, as late-night shopping and office parties start to mop up the punters.

The River Café had its origins in a work canteen and has never quite lost that no-nonsense quality, but while Randall preserves some of its homely plainness in his menu the surroundings here are pointedly upmarket - chairs in pale green, a big abstract on the wall that looks like magnified mille fiore glass and a long horizontal display-case containing grasses above brown-wood panelling. The effect is of nature manicured into decor, though it's possible that I only think this because it harmonises with my first impression of the food - which is of rustic cuisine with some of its rough edges smoothed off. Look at the menu and, prices apart, you could be in some perfect Italian truck stop. Look up from it and you could be nowhere but the boutique restaurant of an expensive international hotel.

The tricky business of marketing cucina povera to the wealthy is brought home by my wife's bagna cauda (£10) - a dish that she loves because of the contrast between the punch of the garlic- and anchovy-flavoured oil (as subtle as a fish-gutter's armpit) and the clean crispness of the raw vegetables you dabble in it. Not here though, because instead of arriving in a separate bowl with its own burner the sauce arrives already drizzled over an arrangement of cooked vegetables. The components are very good - swiss chard, the fractal minarets of Romanesco cauliflower, Jerusalem and violet artichokes - but none the less something has gone missing from the dish. My agnolotti (£9) - stuffed with slow-cooked veal, partridge and pancetta - is similarly mixed. The pasta wrapping is flawless - supple and miraculously thin - but the stuffing is disappointingly refined; a paste in which the distinct flavours have muddled into a generic meaty pink.

Main courses are better - a fish stew of Scottish lobster, red mullet, monkfish and vongole served in a soupy stock with fennel, tomato and saffron potatoes (£25), and wood-roasted turbot, served with capers and marjoram and leek and artichoke trifolati (£26). But even here there are quibbles that you shouldn't get with dishes that cost this much. The potato in the fish stew is mealy and bland, rather than a waxy variety that would work better. As for my turbot ... after failing to pin down any flaws in the dish itself I realise my quibble is the price. Yes, there's a real skill in not doing too much to superb ingredients, but do we have to pay quite so much for what wasn't done? And since none of the pasta dishes is available in larger sizes you'll be hard pressed to avoid the heftier end of the menu.

My wife's dessert - a vin santo ice cream with orange biscotti - is the one dish we have that really pulls off the combination of simplicity and luxury, perhaps because it takes the most elementary Italian dessert, cantucci and vin santo, and adds an

extra twist to it. It's very good indeed, and it rather eclipses my panna cotta served with chestnut and croquante, in which the panna cotta is tremblingly perfect but the chestnut paste defiantly unsweetened - a combination that to my mind simply doesn't work. Randall's well-deserved reputation and the InterContinental's holding tank of well-heeled diners should fill the seats here, but I wouldn't be in a hurry to fill one again myself.

*Theo Randall at the InterContinental 1 Hamilton Place, Park Lane, London W1 (020-7409 3131). £114.75 for two*

Food ★★★★★

Ambience ★★★★★

Service ★★★★★

### **Side orders: River Café alumni**

#### **Fifteen**

Jamie Oliver spent three years as a sous chef at the River Café. Now it's his turn to help young people who want to enter the restaurant trade at his food school and trattoria in Hoxton, which serves comforting, hearty Italian cuisine. Three-course set lunch, £25.

Westland Place, London N1 (0871 330 1515)

#### **Moro**

Sam and Sam Clark learnt much about simple seasonal cooking at the River Café. They've put their knowledge to inspired use in the aromatic and award-winning Spanish-Moorish Moro - which is, according to Nigella Lawson, "to Spanish food what the River Café is to Italian".

34 Exmouth Market, London EC1 (020-7833 8336)

#### **The Wells**

After training at the RC and head-cheffing at Marylebone's Villandry, Steven Evenett-Watts is impressing the Hampstead locals with his menu at this seductively atmospheric local bar and pub. Work up an appetite for a two-course Sunday lunch (£20) with a walk on the Heath.

30 Well Walk, London NW3 (020-7794 3785)

#### **Randall & Aubin**

The champagne and oyster bar - which has branches in Soho, Chelsea and Fulham - is owned by Ed Baines, whose previous form includes time spent at the Dorchester, River Café, Bibendum and Daphne's. The menu features lots of fresh seafood and rotisserie-cooked meats.

14-16 Brewer Street, London W1 (020-7287 4447)

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