

Bilson's Restaurant

Bilson's Restaurant –Raddison Plaza Hotel

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For the final official Dinner Club outing of Jeff's Farewell Tour (and the last outing for the year), we decided to splurge and try our first "3 hatter" together. In the past month and a half, we managed to try all sorts of new cuisine and great dishes – as well as some terrible ones, but the climax for the Club this year would take place at Bilson's Restaurant. This was effectively a Christmas Party for the Club.

Bilson's was one of the two "3 hatters" I hadn't had the pleasure of dining at (the other being Tetsuya's which will be conquered by the Club in June 2010!). Anticipation was high for a good feed as well as a pleasurable dining experience. The actual location and surroundings was actually a bit of a letdown. Located on the 1st floor of the Raddison Plaza Hotel, the restaurant overlooks... O'Connell Street. Oh well, can't have it all...

Review

Course 1:

(Amuse-Bouche) Beetroot Ravioli Stuffed with Goat's Cheese

The first difference I noted between Bilson's and our last outing the week before at Azuma is the presentation and attention to detail of each dish. The amuse-bouche was a very simple dish in terms of ingredients, but you could see that a lot of thought went into the contrast in colours and the choice of dish design.

The dish itself was unique; a mixture of beetroot and cheese – ravioli style. Surprisingly, the flavours mixed well together despite their contrast in texture and taste. A criticism of this dish has to be the difficulty we had in eating the ravioli – it certainly was not an easy task. The ravioli is really a slice of beetroot folded in half, so the ravioli was not sealed and we did have some problems handling it correctly. We did look rather dorky with the beetroot sliding off the fork all the time.

I wouldn't say that this was one of my favourite dishes, but the Dinner Club is all about trying new things and seeing what the world has to offer in the way of new and innovating tastes (and designs). This dish definitely fits in with these ideals of The Dinner Club.

Course 2:

Dressed Spanner Crab, Verjus Geleè, Pink Radish and Black Grape

Nothing prepared me for what lay in store for this dish. The presentation was phenomenal. From edible flowers and the pink radish to the spanner crab and black grape, the colours of this dish looked more like a tranquil painting than a serving of food. The colours meshed so well together and it made you happy just by looking at it. We paused for about 3-4 minutes asking ourselves if we really should eat this or not. In the end, our natural instincts took over, but we were definitely reluctant to start. Bite by bite, we would try not to ruin the picture.

As for the taste, it was good but slightly below the standard of the presentation. Perhaps I am being a little harsh as I still loved the taste, but I just rate the presentation of this dish so highly. A variety of textures were prevalent in this dish and they provided a great contrast. The highlight for me was the spanner crab and jelly below combining to produce a rich sweet taste.

Course 3:

Sashimi of Crystal Bay Prawns with Braised Bangalow Pork Neck

We had all tried sashimi prawns at Wagaya and were complaining of the intense, dense taste back then. The Bilson's-style sashimi was superb though – helped by the thin slicing. The intense, dense taste was still prevalent, but it was more spread throughout each bite, allowing a greater eating experience. The pork on the other hand, was rather stringy and lacking in flavour. Pork belly would have worked better in this dish rather than the pork neck used.

Once again, the presentation of this dish was superb. Although not as colourful as the previous dish, the prawn and pork was still very well designed. A good dish overall, the highlight being proving that sashimi prawn can work if done properly.

Course 4:

Tarte Fine of Scallops with Silverbeet, Veal Sweetbreads and Truffled Sauce

Oh my gosh. I was very happy with the meal thus far, but this tipped me over the edge. First, a gigantic scallop arrived – A scallop on steroids. Then I tasted the dish... It was the best scallop I have tasted in my life! In my profile, scallops are listed first in my favourite foods. I've tasted plenty of scallops over the years but none were better than this.

If course 2 (the spanner crab) was my favourite in terms of presentation, then this course is my favourite for taste. The scallop came from Nova Scotia. I have since 'Googled' the place in an attempt to move there (but then found out it was Canada). Seared on both sides and slightly raw in the middle (as is the best way to do scallops), the Steroid Scallop was cooked to perfection. The additional items on the dish (silverbeet, sweetbread, prosciutto and a nice sauce) were a perfect complement to my Steroid Scallop making the taste sensation that much better.

I was going to lick the plate – a perfect way to salute and pay homage the dish, but my manners got the better of me and I refrained from causing further embarrassment to the club. I hope you can now feel my joy.

Course 5:

Hiramasa Kingfish with Sauce Romesco and Textures of Onion

Ah, the perils of following the greatest dish of the night (or perhaps ever??). The kingfish was perfectly cooked – fried to perfection. On any other ordinary night (or served for any other course), this dish would have been fantastic. However, as the kingfish followed that scallop, this dish only rates as... good.

The fish was fresh although we could have done without the "textures of onion". There were three types of onion in that dish – the fried crispy sheet of onion, the caramelised onion (underneath the fried part) and a pickled one under the foam. That was probably three types too many. This dish would have worked better with some side vegetables to go with the fish – this has the additional benefit of allowing the Bilson's presentation to take over and impress again. Alas it wasn't to be. Good dish, but not fantastic.

Course 6:

Roasted Partridge 'en Canapé' of Smoked Pain Perdu and Foie Gras

This was my second favourite dish of the night and was also up there in the "oh my gosh" category. This dish was fantastic – each element playing a part in the overall flavour and texture of each bite. The partridge was juicy and succulent through each bite, the Foie Gras was rich and combined superbly with the brioche. To top off the dish, the sauce was sweet with the perfect amount of salt.

No disappointments at all in this dish – it was up there with the scallop. Just looking at the photos of the partridge and foie gras has me salivating once again. For this dish, presentation was lower than previous dishes, but I don't care. Give me an ugly dish with a great taste over a beautiful dish with crap taste anytime!

Course 7:

Dry Aged Black Sirloin with Truffled Vegetables 'en Cocotte' and Polenta

Prepare for a huge letdown right now. This dish looks great, sounds great, but didn't meet expectations. In some ways, this dish (like Azuma's wagyu steak course) suffers because it was consumed in Michael's post-Rockpool steak era, but this dish was pretty standard.

This dish has superb presentation once again with baby radish, baby carrots and mushrooms with nicely coloured sauces, but the meat was quite tough and really felt like a filler-type dish. By this, I mean the dish in a degustation which is heavy and will make you satisfied to the point where you are full. For example, in Azuma we had the Udon just before dessert. The same thing was evident here – filler dish.

Course 8:

Petit Fromage Affiné

The waiter introduced this dish with a comment along the lines of "this cheese is very strong, so the chef has created a foam out of it to make it more palatable". If this foam is the weak form, then unadulterated form of this cheese must come from some biohazardous material. Even in foam form, the cheese was far too strong for my palate and I think everyone's on the table.

For the cheese course, if the restaurant expects everyone to eat and enjoy every single course, they can't serve out something like this that doesn't really cater to the more "conservative" taste buds. This is the first time I've tried blue cheese and I am fairly certain it will be the last. Terrible.

Course 9:

The Chestnut and the Pear

Ah, the first of the desserts! The first bite after the bad cheese experience was a welcome relief, right up until the point where I tasted the cheese component of the dessert. In isolation, this dish would have been perfect for a first dessert, but following the cheese, it was a little bit of a disaster. The dish consisted of ginger ice cream, pear, sweet crumble on the side and cheese cream – the middle blob which looks like ice cream and certainly fooled me.

Everything on this dish was great with the overall sweetness of the dish not to overpowering. However, the experience would have been better with some form of pre-dessert. This would have provided a palate cleansing and avoided any remanent of that terrible cheese dish one course before. Presentation was superb yet again – the photos give an accurate reflection of the placement and attention to detail so .

Course 10:

Sacher Chocolate 'dans tous ces états'

I usually love chocolate, but this dish was a bit too much. The second and final dessert of the evening consisted of seven different types of chocolate in the form of chocolate ice cream (3 parts), chocolate bits (2 parts), chocolate cake (1 part) and chocolate toffee (1 part). Chocolate, chocolate, chocolate and more chocolate! As you can see from the pictures, the ice cream had partially melted and the dish a bit too rich and sweet for my tastes. I believe this was their signature dessert and it was a bit of a let down.

Coffee, Tea and Petits Fours

The petit fours consisted of three components, some white chocolate with caramel centre, a mango and apricot jelly and a macaroon. These were beautifully crafted – the white chocolate was particularly special. The petit fours were also very sweet, perfectly complementing the café latté I ordered at the end of the meal.

3 Good and 3 Bad

3 Good

- **Presentation**

The presentation of each dish was the best out of any restaurant thus far in our Dinner Club travels – by a country mile. The attention to detail in each dish with the colours and the placement of ingredients made the dining experience that much better. 3 hats for sure – the standard is so much better.

- **That Scallop**

I will go harping on about this scallop for years to come. Just like Rockpool Bar and Grill's steak, this one will live long into the memory. It is moments like these that I'm glad we started The Dinner Club.

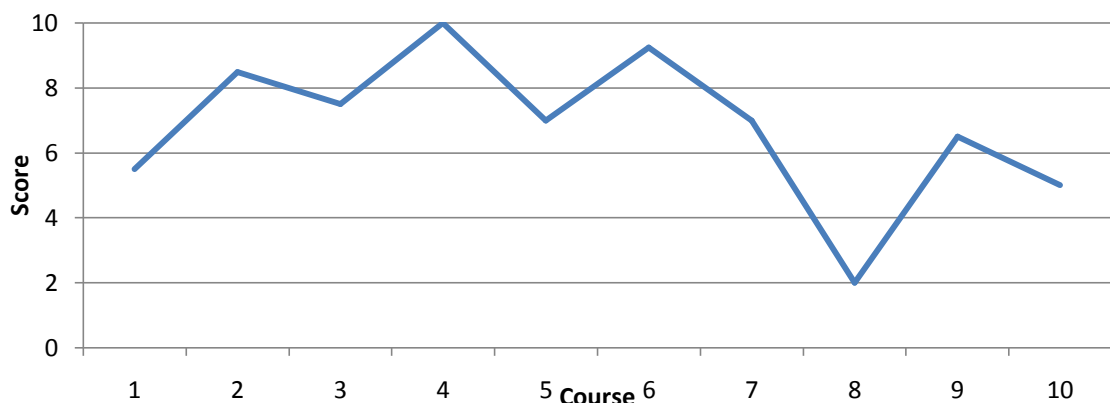
- **Birds and Geese**

The partridge was only slightly below the scallop in terms of taste, so this one is right up there as well in the memories created by this dinner. I don't approve of how they produce foie gras, but we are judging on taste and presentation rather than the inhumane way food is produced. This dinner was a great way to send Jeff off to greener pastures.

3 Bad

- **Inconsistency**

Being a bit of a nerdy club as well, I thought it would be a good idea to plot a graph of course vs score to illustrate my major beef with the meal. Overall, the meal was top quality. Presentation and taste exceeded expectations. However, I'm really disappointed at the inconsistency in the quality of dishes. Perhaps some of the dishes are just unsuited to my taste, but I thought there was too much of a down-up-down-up pattern prevalent.



- **Dessert**

After the highs of the scallop and partridge, I was really looking forward to dessert. Unfortunately, I felt this was lacking a bit. The pear dish was alright, but the chocolate was a huge disappointment – a lacklustre way to finish a great meal.

- **That Cheese**

I will go harping on about that scallop for the rest of my life, however, I will also go on about that cheese dish for the rest of my life. Friends, be prepared! My first blue cheese experience actually had a negative impact on the first dessert – I now know why a cleansing of the palate is necessary before every meal transition.

Ratings

Food Quality 9.25/10

Despite the inconsistencies mentioned above, I have to give a really good score for quality. The scallop and partridge dishes were so amazing and the other dishes weren't too shabby either. Overall, it is not difficult to see why this restaurant is three chef hats.

Value 6/10

The degustation came to \$140 total for the 10 courses + coffee/tea/petit four. The 6/10 rating is in relation to the other restaurants we have tried this far. A fairly high price to pay for the meal, but it is entirely understandable given it is three chef hats.

Ambiance 9/10

Location wasn't too great – on the first floor of the Raddison Plaza with no real views, but there were plenty of diners and that made for a much better atmosphere.

Cleanliness 10/10

Top marks for cleanliness as expected.

Service 9/10

Great service, not too far away from a higher mark. Service was just better at other places.