

Hanoi with a twist



Des Britten

BEING quizzed last week in a television interview as to where the fashion in food was going to go next, having successfully shaken off the nouvelle cuisine misadventure and recently all that fuss and folly over fusion and its recipe for multicultural intermarriage, I trembled at the very thought of a new reported entrant, molecular gastronomy.

The very name is stomach churning, but it does seem — and one can't argue with success — that 600 know-alls about food, namely chefs and critics, voted Brit chef Heston Blumenthal and his Fat Duck restaurant the best in the whole damned world. Ponder you may what this new name in the foodie fashion stakes means, but I am reliably told that molecular gastronomy applies chemistry, physics and other scientific principles to the prep of food.

The Big Cheese tells us that when dealing with a green tea and lime mousse to cleanse the palate, to hell with the icecream machine or churn — “To make it really cold, I just dip for 50 seconds in liquid nitrogen”. All this nitrogen stuff is only the tip of a Titanic iceberg. It paves the way for bacon and egg icecream and carpaccio of cauliflower with chocolate jelly, oysters with passion fruit, also jellied, and a sorbet of sardines on toast. Some have been moved to say Mr Molecular is “possessed of an urge in gastronomic eccentricity”, others that “all the dishes sound like a mistake”. A well-known critic says: “It is, in essence, the kind of food that a discerning astronaut or a dying billionaire with no teeth might enjoy, but I find myself desperate for a proper lunch — a perfect roast chicken and a crisp green salad. Anything, instead of — oh God — another pool of Douglas fir puree which tastes like a cedar candle smells.”

It does make you wonder if this is a laboratory or a kitchen, but to find out it will cull \$510 for two out of your bank account, without any softening up from a bottle of

LOCALE

Restaurant 88, 88 Tory St.
Ph (04) 385 9088.

GRAZING

Lunch Monday-Friday 11am-2pm; Saturday and Sunday 9.30am-2.30pm; dinner Tuesday-Sunday 5.30pm till late.

WINE LIST

A good aromatic section to harmonise with the food. No greedy mark-ups.

ADDITIONS

Entrees \$10-\$14; mains \$22-\$24; desserts \$10-\$12. Value for money — very good.

THE WAITING GAME

Chummy and friendly.

SOUND BARRIER

Easy listening background music.

AFTERTHOUGHTS

I got the feeling that someone in the kitchen was trying hard to do things right and in the main succeeding. Worth a look at and an interesting change of air.

wine to condition you as to how you might deal with, perhaps, a small portion of snail porridge. An old friend and respected chef who taught me so much would say, as he did of the nouveau and fusion fads, that it's food for the rich and famous who eat out too much, have buckets of dosh and become bored with what we would regard as the very best. It seems this molecular man is a very clever one-off and we won't be seeing too many clones coming out of his kitchen to invade the planet.

I can vouch that there was not a whiff of anything wacky or mind-blowingly molecular at **Restaurant 88** in Tory St. Not a test tube in sight and in no way did I think I was being treated as a guinea pig. Things here have headed off in a Vietnamese direction and that's not surprising, as Luke, owner and chef, is from that very neck of the woods. Why, when the restaurant opened some months ago, he didn't stick to his knitting I don't know, but now good sense has prevailed and some food of interest is rolling out of the kitchen.

Mind you, the word “metropolitan” is also tossed around here, so

you might bump into a bit of French chocolate cake, or some fresh Italian olive and rosemary focaccia, lurking among the Asian offerings. Like kids at play, we got our hands into some extra-tender, super-sticky barbecued baby pork back ribs. Ablution bowls were provided and needed, but getting in a sticky mess was a delight. There are a lot of “dive in” dishes here, which have you abandoning all the manners your mum taught you. A Drunken Crispy Salt and Pepper Poussin had the menu in command mode — “Best Eaten with your Hands”. I don't need to be told twice, so we dutifully obeyed. Not as drunk as I do to a similar dish, the baby chicken was not over the limit and took well to the lemongrass-steamed rice and those nice sweet and sour salads tossed together with carrot, cucumber, mint and coriander.

I'd steer clear of the aubergine fritters, which came from the Italian department. These critters had soaked up so much oil of a used variety, they were, well — nasty. Hop instead into the Hanoi Prawn Toast Fritters. These came spread with minced prawn on long slices of baguette and crisply fried. A real pleaser.

A crispy rice cake, sizzled in a wok and stuffed with every green leaf under the sun, plus pork and prawns, brought back happy memories of Siem Reap in Victoria St.

A little byline rides on their advertising blurbs and cards, menus, etc — “Home of the Green Lanterns”. Slightly amusing, but the greens are there, hanging long, low, green and tubular, but they're smart enough, contrasting with a background of warm burgundy walls. It's all pretty comfy, really, broken up by much vegetation from potted palms and flattering lighting.

I wondered whether I was about to meet up with things slightly molecular, as I put on a brave face and took a punt on Vietnamese rice pudding, laced with black-eyed beans in a coconut custard. It looked smart in its flute-type glass, and while the Redhead thought it “different”, we both downed it and nodded in agreement that it was a pleasant surprise.

This is food with a different twist in its tail. For purists of things Vietnamese, some liberties are taken and a modern face put on things. I didn't object at all. Not stunning, but good sturdy stuff.

Bon appetit.