

12.08.06

RESTAURANT REVIEW

Joanna Blythman

Commercial Quay in Edinburgh's Leith is the restaurant equivalent of those postcodes that trigger alarm bells at insurance companies. As a queue of unhappy suppliers can testify, several establishments have briefly inhabited a unit in this flashy development before disappearing, some paying their debts, others not.

This is not what the urban regeneration people at the council want to hear. The architecturally distinguished port – once renowned for its claret trade with Bordeaux and, more recently, notorious for prostitution – has been talked up as Edinburgh's yuppie hotspot. Now, apparently, it's all entryphoned condominiums with roof terraces, happening bistros and "exciting retail developments".

Commercial Quay these days looks over a watery piazza on to the self-important headquarters of the Scottish Executive. And before the huffy letters pour in, let's make it clear that several businesses have managed to keep going here. However, walking into The Kitchin provoked a sense of *deja vu*. I knew I'd been here before, but the restaurants were so fleeting I couldn't recall their names.

With that "dead man's shoes" feeling in my bones, I was amazed to find that the place was humming – and it wasn't even the weekend. Thankfully, the name is not some naff play

on words: the chef-proprietor is one Tom Kitchin, a Scot who returned in May to set up his own place with his partner Michaela Berselius. He has an impressive CV that includes stints with Pierre Koffmann in London and with Alain Ducasse and Guy Savoy in France. She has an equally strong front of house portfolio. They have given a radical makeover to a place that suffered from an echoing, empty atmosphere. Radically, they have painted the dining room slate grey and cut off almost all natural light, leaving the partially visible kitchen as the main source of illumination. Weirdly, it feels intimate and welcoming, albeit in a crepuscular, nightclub-like way.

A tartare of mackerel flagged up that Kitchin is a serious, confident, capable chef. The fish was ultra-fresh, all clean-cut marine flavour, respectfully dressed with herbs and lemon, encircled by paper-thin cucumber and a dice of roasted beetroot. Along with curly Melba toast made from decent bread, it had

The Kitchin 8/10**Telephone** 0131-555 1755.**Address** 78 Commercial Quay, Leith, Edinburgh. **Open** Tues-Sat, lunch, 12.30-2.30pm, dinner 7-10.30pm.**Price** Around £45 a head with wine and service. **Disabled access and WC.**

everything you want from a summer starter. As did the rustic terrine, rich with liver and fatty pork, and punctuated by the bright green crunch of pistachios. The terrine was lightened up by rugged fingers of sourdough toast spread with intense beef jus and a half-raw, half-marinated salad of fennel, pink radishes and cauliflower.

Commendably, given that most restaurants duck the question, the menu is explicit on the wild versus farmed fish question. Wild sea trout was the obvious seasonal choice, but it came in a dark, acidic shallot gravy that would have flattered sausages but overwhelmed the fish – sea trout can take strong flavours, just not this one. A pity, because the fish was impeccably fried, timed perfectly to be lusciously moist within, and its accompanying salad of shaved fennel already provided a more complementary counterpoint. The other main course was better thought out: succulent medallions of monkfish roasted inside springy squid, served with spinach, cubes of celeriac, potatoes fried nut-brown and crusty, and a punchy mustard and caper sauce.

A light touch prevails with desserts. Orange and pink grapefruit segments marinated in a mint and Earl Grey syrup with a zesty lime mascarpone sorbet refreshed the palate. And what is there not to like about ripe summer berries, coated with an eggy sabayon, then flashed under the grill?

Apart from the food, the Kitchin's greatest asset is its *maitre d'*, a Frenchman who displays his nation's aptitude for talking eagerly about food and wine, describing the dishes and wines with relish and without pretension, sounding like a man who routinely consumer-tests what's on offer. His enthusiasm is infectious. The wine list features interesting producers and its prices are relatively restrained. If ever there was a restaurant that can make these premises work, it's the Kitchin.

Bad Food Britain: How A Nation Ruined Its Appetite, by Joanna Blythman, is published by Fourth Estate at £7.99.

Matthew Norman is away.

