

He's the chef who threw langoustine ravioli at Gordon Ramsay. Now he's opened Britain's most outrageously lavish restaurant. Our man went along to sample dinner ... all 18 courses of it!

# FANCY A FOIE GRAS BURGER?

famous for being full. Now, West Street boasts two more places where you can't sit down.

Unlike The Ivy, though, you don't have to make a reservation at birth or turn up with Sir Elton John in order to eat. L'Atelier only takes dinner reservations until 7pm.

For lunch or dinner any other time, you just turn up and queue for as long as you can be bothered. But for a table at La Cuisine, you need to book.

I want to go with friends and eat at a table, not a bar. What's more, I don't want to eat dinner in daylight and I don't want to queue. So that

rules out L'Atelier. I call La Cuisine. 'We are full, I think, until next month,' purrs the foxy French voice on the end of the phone.

Happening restaurants often say this. Some turn away one in four callers just to exaggerate their popularity. In this case, though, I can believe it. But when I plead for a late table any time soon, there is a bit of French humming and the girl says she can squeeze us in at 9.30pm in four days' time.

There is plenty of attitude when I arrive. Older restaurants have doormen. Younger ones have bouncers. And these two are dressed in the black trenchcoat of

the bouncing tendency. Inside, there is a surfeit of front desk staff. Then I discover why. I am meeting my friends in the bar which is at the top of the building, but I have to be escorted by a girl.

When I want to take a peek inside the ground floor eating area, I have to be escorted, too. Later on, someone even escorts me to the gents.

The only thing more irritating than being ignored by restaurant staff is being followed everywhere like a potentially delinquent child. However, the escorts, dressed head to toe in black, are very pretty.

Having been successfully chaperoned to the table without



PICTURE: MURRAY SANDERS

## Menu

**Dinner:**  
 Stewed vegetables  
 Crabmeat in citrus jelly  
 Iberian ham with tomato bread  
 Crushed aubergine  
 Chilled gazpacho  
 Cold foie gras with toast  
 Egg cocotte with mushroom cream  
 Langoustine fritter  
 Mackerel on thin tart  
 Scallops  
 Frogs' legs  
 Warm foie gras with peaches  
 Sea bass with ricotta-filled macaroni  
 Cod with aromatic vegetables  
 Lamb cutlets with thyme  
 Calf's sweetbreads with Swiss chard  
 Roast duckling with orange  
 Quail stuffed with foie gras and truffled mashed potato.

**Plus: Chocolate Sensation Strawberry panna cotta**

**And, 12 hours later, lunch...**  
 Clams stuffed with garlic  
 Langoustine ravioli  
 Tiger prawn with angel hair  
 Veal and foie gras terrine  
 Pig's trotter on parmesan toast  
 Sautéed squid  
 Roast pork  
 Beef and foie gras burger

**Plus: Lemon Sorbet Liqueur-soaked raspberries**

**Total cost: £350 (excl. 12.5% service, wine, water, coffee)**

misbehaving, we check the menus and the action. 'That's a happy kitchen. I hate screaming. It's bad for the food. That is a very good *équipe*,' notes Sophie Douglas-Bate, one of my guests.

She runs Edible Food Design, one of London's most innovative catering companies. If the food is as impossible as everyone says, I want to hear it from someone who really knows her grub.

For the same reason, I have invited Bobby Read. A noted London gourmet who once cooked for Marco Pierre White, he regards it as a mark of principle to eat his way through 100 Michelin stars each year.

There are three menus. You can have a conventional three-course dinner from an *a la carte* menu at conventional West End prices (lamb cutlets: £20). You can pick your own selection from an 18-course menu. Or you can have a seven-course tasting menu for £80.

I do a quick sum. The three of us can order the last and will each eat the same seven dishes for £240. Or, we can order the entire 18-course menu for marginally less. For the first time in my life, I turn to a waiter and solemnly declare: 'We'll have the lot.' He doesn't blink.

**O**UR waiting staff are faultless. They wait around unobtrusively but are on hand the instant you want to know where your *grolle* mushroom was picked or which ocean produced your salt. They are as passionate about the food as the chefs toiling silently next to the open wood fire in the kitchen.

It's certainly a far cry from the Paris kitchen where an exasperated Mr Robuchon allegedly pelted a young Gordon Ramsay, then a trainee, with langoustine ravioli in 1990. These days, they are *frienos* (Gordon was in the previous evening).

The dishes arrive in waves of three. First up are the crab in citrus jelly, the Iberian ham with tomato bread and a small beauty parade of crispy vegetables standing to attention on an oregano pastry base (a £12 rabbit food option for the supermodel crowd).

'Fabulous presentation,' says Sophie. The ham is dense with flavour but Bobby is unimpressed by the random slices. 'It's been hacked, not cut.'

Phase Two: a straight slab of *foie gras* (£12), a small bowl of the smoothest gazpacho (£8) and aubergine (£9). We try to criticise it but we give up.

Phase Three: I can't bear runny eggs but the others go potty over the egg cocotte drowned in a mushroom foam. Sophie promises to try something similar with quails' eggs. We disagree over the mackerel on a thin tart with parmesan. I think it's too strong, too pesto; the experts are in raptures.

And so we continue well past midnight, through the langoustine fritter, the sea bass with ricotta-filled macaroni. We all agree that the frogs' legs taste, simply, of fry-up. We all make helpless, happy grunting noises most of the time. Only a quintet of scallops defeats us.

We end our 18 courses but the pudding chef is still on standby and it would be rude to neglect him. We manage one Chocolate Sensation between us.

As we leave, Sophie and Bobby have no doubt that Mr Robuchon has more Michelin stars on the way.

Come morning, breakfast is inconceivable. But in the name of journalistic thoroughness, I feel obliged to return for lunch. I've sampled most of the Robuchon repertoire. But there are still a few downstairs dishes in L'Atelier which need scrutiny. I get there early and grab a red leather seat at the jet black bar.

The stuffed clams are garlic heaven. The pig's trotter on parmesan toast is a meal in itself. And then comes the £15 'beef and foie gras burger with lightly caramelised bell peppers'.

It looks small enough until I discover that there are two of them. 'The burger is a new concept which Mr Robuchon has created for London,' says the waitress. My poor stomach. This is pure gluttony. Oh well. Here goes. You can't argue with a demigod who dared to throw ravioli at Gordon Ramsay...