

Great Scot

Some Scottish-themed restaurants can be a pain in the haggis. Not the classy Boisdale, says **EUGENE COSTELLO**

SANDWICHED NEATLY between the gaudy chaos that is Victoria and the old-money grandeur of Eaton Square is arguably London's most exclusive steak restaurant, Boisdale of Belgravia. And it's instantly clear with which of its two neighbours Boisdale feels more comfortable. (We'll give you a clue. It's not the homeless, the hopeless and the hookers of Victoria.)

At once cosy and inviting – like an Edwardian shop front, in a pleasing shade of fire-engine red – it wears its Scottish roots like an aristocrat. That is, it is comfortable with it but never feels the need to shout 'D'ye no knae who I am?' like its Young Pretender rival in Trafalgar Square, Albannach.

They say pets resemble their owners with time, and if the same is true of restaurants I would love to spend a few hours with a leather armchair, a bottle of good malt and a crackling fire in the company of Mr Boisdale. (Or Ranald Macdonald, as the Inland Revenue insists on calling him. I suppose.)

Boisdale is a lake on the island of South Uist in what were once called the Outer Hebrides. It's a nod to the owner's clannish connections. South Uist (along with some southern islands such as Barra and Benbecula) stayed Catholic after the Reformation, and is a world away from the more austere, self-denying, even dour, northern islands such as Lewis.

The inhabitants of these islands are closer to the Irish, with pub culture and

folk-singing, and I imagine Ranald to be an affable and genial host in this mould. (Someone is probably going to write to me now to say that he is a hatchet-faced, whippet-like fellow who pinches children and bullies his staff. Lawyers, keep your hair on. It's a joke.)

So that's the ambience. On another note, we sat by a small stage where later a group of jazz musicians from about 18 to 80 rocked the house; the whole atmosphere was reminiscent of a 1930s Chicago speakeasy. Not that I ever went to one. Obviously. But what about the food?

Well, it's really rather good. For a starter I had the saucily-named *ménage à trois*, while my companion went for crabmeat with spiced avocado and melba toast. The crab was good and brawn-like in its meatiness, its clean marine taste nicely paired with the spicy avocado and the toast, beautifully presented and as good a starter as you'd ordinarily hope.

But the *ménage à trois* – mangetout, Rodney, mangetout. And I did. Eat it all, that is. A ceviche of salmon with soy and coriander threw Latin America and Japan into the pot together (what a strange mental image that conjures up) to great effect. But its two platefellows were exquisite.

First, the award-winning oak-smoked Dunkeld wild salmon (wild as in not farmed, not as in livid). This was a country mile from the Rizla-thin, livid-as-in-sprayed-on-radioactive-orange stuff that has become as cheap as, er, chips. And the hot smoked salmon from Lochcarnan on South Uist – a Gaelic dish called *bradan rost* – gave so much woodiness to the fillet that I peeked over my shoulder to see if someone was craftily smoking a pipe.

And for the main, there really is only one show in town. Fillet of steak. It is a steakhouse, after all. But this not any old steak. Oh no. This is 28-day dry-aged Aberdeen Angus beef from the award-



winning Warwickshire butcher Aubrey Allen. They say of their beef: "Some of it even comes from Ballinalloch Castle itself, home to the oldest Angus herd of all, where the cattle graze on ancient pastures, drink pure Highland water, and come winter time feed on the barley draff from local distilleries. We leave our beef to hang on the bone for as long as three or four weeks and the result is the tastiest, most tender beef around."

And if that doesn't make you want to run up to the nearest craggy, shaggy magnificent beast with a toasting fork in one hand and a serrated knife in the other to carve slices off it as you ride, you're probably a vegetarian.

In which case, you wouldn't be here in the first place. Unless you're a lover of seafood. In which case, come on in. The water at Boisdale is lovely. **H**
From £50 pb inc wine. 15 Ecclestone St, SW1; 020 7730 6922; boisdale.co.uk

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