



Take it to the Bridge

There are those who disapprove of the retail ethic that Sir Terence Conran brings to his restaurants. They've never eaten at the impressive Blueprint Café, says **EUGENE COSTELLO**

SAY WHAT YOU like about Sir Terence Conran – and people do – but he knows how to run restaurants. And much as serial killers are reputed to be drawn back to scenes of previous slaughter (at least, in films), so in 1995 the serial restaurateur created a new gem a mere throw of a tennis ball from the then-four-year-old jewel in the crown of his empire, Le Pont de la Tour.

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Like that superb eatery, Blueprint Café is also to be found at Butler’s Wharf, Shad Thames, against the dramatic backdrop of Tower Bridge. And while the eminence grise of London restaurants has renamed his empire D&D restaurants (he retains a controlling stake), it’s fair to say, a rose by any other name, and all that...

The restaurant is pleasantly sited above the Design Museum on the renovated

eastern reaches of the South Bank, an area of wharves and warehouses that has been energised by Norman Foster’s City Hall, home to the GLA assembly, and of course Tate Modern.

With an abutment that seats around 30 people protruding out over the esplanade, it lends itself both to great views for a business lunch or for dinner. with a dramatic backdrop of some of London’s most iconic sights – the Tower of London, Tower Bridge and, to the east, Canary Wharf and Docklands – all lit up as though auditioning for a location in *Apocalypse Now*.

So much for the setting. But what of the food? Well, we’re here to tell you that you’re in for a treat. And at tremendous value, too – no à la carte option when we visited, just a tremendously reasonable *prix fixe* menu. Two courses for £22.50 or three for £27.50 – it’s as though they’re rolling back the years.

But economies are not being made at the expense of the food. Chef Jeremy Lee is a true champion of the seasonal and local, and seems to be waging a one-man war on food miles. For a starter, we chose the intriguing baked salsify with parmesan. The salsify comes from a supplier in Kent – for those of you who have yet to encounter it, it is a root vegetable somewhat like the thick end of asparagus without the spear or tip, with a flavour that approximates to artichoke. Three or four lengths are rolled in a so-delicate-it-might-start-weeping *feuille de brique* pastry, then baked with shavings of parmesan. The heartiness of the salsify is well matched with the gentleness of the pastry, and the whole effect is at once dainty yet hearty. The Eddie Izzard of starters, if you will. Coy about where to source salsify – a secret supplier from Kent – they did eventually concede that you might – just *might* – find it at Borough Market. On a Wednesday that falls within the third mansion of the moon. In a leap year. If you’re lucky.

And for the other starter we went retro, safe even – smoked haddock fishcakes. But here Lee has given his own interpretation – more pillars than cakes, they are browned in the pan and have just the right combination of potato and fish to give both satisfying crunch and to ensure they retain their

structural integrity. No chasing morsels around your plate with your fork acting as a sheepdog on steroids. A neat pairing that avoids the all-too-obvious accompaniment of tartare was a homemade aioli with a good bite of garlic. Top marks.

And so to mains. My companion chose the brill with artichoke and gremolada, a paste of lime, parsley and garlic that was inspired. The zestiness of the gremolada matched perfectly the clean taste of the brill, lending the whole dish a wonderfully fresh, almost palate-cleansing quality. Those who are squeamish about fish might try their luck in asking whether it could be filleted – my companion was alarmed at the mound of bones that looked as though it should have a cairn next to it honouring the fallen. That said, it was a small price to pay for such a delicately worked dish. Tout simple, tout parfait.

But I am afraid it could only bow and remove itself to the wings to make way for the undoubted maestro of the evening’s performance. A truly sublime dish, featherblade of beef is an oft-neglected cut that is, however, beloved of cooks and butchers. It is effectively shoulder, from between the neck and fore-rib, sometimes known as chuck. Lee braises his for around 18 hours, so I am told, in a red wine jus, so that by the time the two medallions reached my table, they seemed to be having their 19th nervous breakdown, they were so ready to fall apart. Layer upon layer, sinew upon sinew, detached themselves from each other and dripped onto my tongue – I wasn’t sure whether I was eating it or drinking it. And served as it was with whole baby organic carrots, skin-on sauté potatoes and a plate of

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RETURN OF THE NATIVE: Inspired by the rich produce of his native Scotland chef Jeremy Lee is working minor miracles with the seasonal, the local and the artisanal at the Blueprint Café

curly kale, it was about as seasonal and local as a Millwall fan, though obviously in an attractive way.

Desserts are plentiful, but we plumped for a mess of pecan with berry ice cream that was a delicious combination of the sweet and the tart (no Eddie Izzard-like pun here), leaving room for a cheeseboard that was a celebration of British artisanal produce. A creamy Strathdon Blue, a pungent Keen’s Cheddar, a creamy brick-like Wigmore and a gorgeously chalky, Wensleydale-like Cotherstone.

Cheeses... is there anything they can’t do, as Homer might say?

A note about wine – starters and brill came with a 2008 Sancerre (£42 a bottle), while my featherblade danced the light fantastic with a generous, oakyo rioja (£8 a glass). Which meant that the whole bill came in at just over £100. At these prices, it would be rude not to. Featherblade, do not forsake me – I shall be back to make sweet, sweet music with you soon. **H**
From £40pb inc wine. Blueprint Café, Design Museum, Shad Thames SE1; 020 7378; blueprintcafe.co.uk