

Elystan Street, London: fine dining despite humbler ambitions

‘The chef’s treatment of a piece of cod was the greatest compliment you can pay to a fish short of actually proposing to it’

“ Tim Hayward



Elystan Street's dining room © Jeremy Rata



Save

AN HOUR AGO by: **Tim Hayward**

As head chef and part-owner of The Square, a Michelin two-star in Mayfair, Phil Howard became one of the most important chefs in this country. He opened the restaurant aged 24, and maintained critical acclaim for more than two decades, overcoming his struggle with drug addiction as a younger man. Even though he’d declared an intention to step away from the stove when his lease on The Square was sold this year, he’s been unable to resist. Howard is back on the pans at Elystan Street and the effort shows.



Beef tartare with artichoke heart © Lisa Barber

A piece of cod fillet, roasted to a crust at the top yet close to sashimi in the depth of the flakes, was the greatest compliment you can pay to a fish short of actually proposing to it. A topping of fat golden raisins and sharp lime counterpointed the underlying smear of purée, made of a sublime curried cauliflower, licentiously spiced. It was noticeable that pretty much the only carbohydrates to appear at the table were in the form of a ravishing sourdough that, if one were that way inclined, could be pushed fashionably aside. Howard clearly understands his audience.

A pistachio, fig and almond tart came with goat’s cheese ice cream, dressed in olive oil and thyme. To my particular taste, it came across as a little too sweet. After several courses without carbs, the punters here must need to go to town on the dessert but this minor cavil was eclipsed when, on returning from the bathroom, I found my waiter standing at a sideboard, administering a kicking to my plate of cheeses. Though he apologised at tableside that “ze only French cheese” was the Epoisses, he had clearly had to spend considerable effort disciplining the rowdy Baron Bigod and a feisty little English blue that wasn’t taking orders from anyone. It was a classic “five-cheese” plate that any friendly brasserie should be able to do creditably, but that a team of this pedigree can turn into a performance that makes you unwilling to ever leave.

In the future I think we’ll look back on the time when Phil Howard “quit” fine dining as a climacteric in British cuisine. He’s done it with due thought and, probably, at exactly the right time. I’m glad he’s failed to step away from the kitchen, though, because his work still thrills. But if he thought for a moment he was going to idly knock out simple nosh, or ever be a bit “average”, well, good luck with that one.

Elystan Street

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