

Art à la carte

Art and food have had a happy marriage for as long as artists have been painting for their supper. But the latest restaurant-as-gallery is taking its role as tastemaker to a whole new level

Words | Stephanie Theobald

WE'VE HAD STEPHEN FRY AS BLOGGER IN RESIDENCE at The Savoy and now fashion designers at large in The Dorchester hotel, yet this is the first time a British Michelin-starred restaurant has come up with the idea of an "artist in restaurant". Last year, David Moore, founder of the two Michelin-starred Pied à Terre in London's Fitzrovia, decided that rather than buying in art to adorn the walls of his restaurant, he'd hire an artist to make a bespoke piece: "Its like the bread in our kitchens: we make our own. And we want to create our own art."

He set up an annual residency for emerging artists, with the first being Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva (elpihv.co.uk), a Macedonian-British sculptor, who has been at the restaurant three days a week since January. She has had access to all the nooks and crannies, from wine cellars and roof-top herb garden to the infernal heart of any restaurant – the kitchen. In September, she will have completed the artwork, inspired by her experiences at the restaurant, and it will go on display in the dining room. "We want her work to challenge us," says Moore, "although it must be sympathetic to the restaurant environment."

Yet contemporary artists are hardly renowned for their timidity, and Hadzi-Vasileva, 39, is a brave choice as she is known in the art world for her delicate sculptures made from pig gut and chicken skin. Recent works include a ballgown made from chicken skin and Valenciennes lace woven entirely from tripe. Some of her other sculptures have included butter, sugar, bird heads and watercress.

"I'm really excited about this opportunity," says Hadzi-Vasileva, emerging from the Pied à Terre kitchens clad in chefs whites and clasping her research camera. "A restaurant feels like a theatre. There's the backstage, the front-of-house and everyone plays different roles."

The fact that Pied à Terre's regulars – the restaurant's a favourite with Andrew Lloyd Webber, Ewan McGregor and John Hurt – are waiting with bated breath to see what Hadzi-Vasileva will come up with is a sign of the times. Previously viewed as impoverished eccentrics with a tendency to freeload (at La Colombe d'Or in the south of France, the walls are littered with 40s and 50s "bill payments" in the form of paintings by Matisse, Picasso, Modigliani, Chagall and Miró), artists are now seen as glamorous cash cows who can bring pizzazz and, best of all, new customers to bars, restaurants and hotels.

These days, artists are even invited into the kitchens. New York restaurant, Park Avenue has just started a series of artist-chef collaborations. This month sees a "multi-sensory culinary intervention" called Volcano Flambé, by performance artist Marina Abramović, which claims to lead diners through the physical and spiritual relationship the body has towards Baked Alaska.

When Hadzi-Vasileva has changed out of her chef's whites and joins me for lunch, she describes herself as a "virgin when it comes to Michelin-star eating". She's from Macedonia, not known for its fine dining, although she's now been living in the UK for 20 years. Before finishing an MA at the Royal College of Art, she did an art foundation in Glasgow where, she admits, she "once ate a deep-fried pizza". Yet she's obviously keen on food because, as the waiter brings us out course after course of artfully displayed cuisine, prefaced by a fancy announcement of the exact elements on the plate, Hadzi-Vasileva responds with a "Wow!" or a "Oh my God, that's delicious!"

She's aware her final piece must fit in with the art already in the restaurant. The company is eminent and includes paintings by Richard Hamilton, the godfather of Pop Art, as well as colourful work by Moore's friends Howard Hodgkin and Sir Peter Blake. Moore met the haute arty crowd during his early career working at Raymond Blanc's renowned Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons in Oxfordshire. Richard Hamilton was one of the restaurant's original investors when it began in 1991 and is now on the board of directors.

As we tuck into Pan-Fried Turbot with Shaved Chervil Root, Braised Cavolo Nero and Caper Beurre Noisette, Hadzi-Vasileva confides she hasn't told Moore she's not fond of fish: "I'm not a fussy eater," she says. "It's just that I once spent six months tearing apart 2,500 salmon for a fish-skin tapestry."

When our final spectacular course arrives: Mango and Lime Velouté, Chilli Coconut Foam and Thai Basil for me and Warm Chocolate Moelleux for Hadzi-Vasileva, she says the shaving of chestnut on her plate looks like, "one of my art works – like a brain scan". She adds, "Food can be beautiful. I love how the chefs here strive for aesthetic, as well as gastronomic, perfection." She's intrigued to see what the chefs throw away. "My work concentrates on using materials traditionally seen as waste products – things we take for granted but that can be beautiful."

Moore says, "It'll be interesting to have another force in the kitchen". But is Hadzi-Vasileva not scared about the heat, the hellish hours and the fact that it's a profession filled with men with prima-donna tendencies? She insists the chefs here aren't as aggressive as the ones portrayed on TV. "They've all been very nice to me."

When I later ask sous-chef Graham Long what he feels about having an artist prowling around in his kitchen, he replies with a cheeky wink, "Another artist, you mean!" *Pied à Terre, 34 Charlotte Street, London W1; +44 (0)20 7636 1178; www.pied-a-terre.co.uk; www.artist-in-restaurant.co.uk*

FEAST YOUR EYES

The best places to find not only fine food but also fine art

LONDON

SCOTT'S

Star-spangled Mayfair seafood restaurant now as famous for its Brit Art collection by the likes of Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin and Martin Creed as it is for the glamorous crustacean displays. 20 Mount Street, W1; +44 (0)20 7495 7309; www.scotts-restaurant.com

THE CONNAUGHT HOTEL

An impressive collection spanning from Victorian portraiture and Edwardian landscapes to recent Abstraction and splashy YBA trophies. Check out the Damien Hirst in the dining room, *above right*, and the Julian Opie in the bar. *Carlos Place, W1; +44 (0)20 7499 7070; www.the-connaught.co.uk*

THE LONDON COCKTAIL CLUB

This new cocktail bar, *below*, calls itself as a 'Punk Hogarthian Gin Palace', and its edgy British street art reflects this concept. Sip your Brixton Riot (peach, cranberry and lychee liqueur with rum) while gazing at Prefab77's dark satires on modern British life. 61 Goodge Street, W1; +44 (0)20 7580 1960; www.londoncocktailclub.co.uk

THE WHITECHAPEL GALLERY DINING ROOM

Anyone can book the new 14-seater wood-panelled Private Dining Room for no extra cost and see the Christian Boltanski sculpture, while eating new chef director Angela Hartnett's special dishes of rabbit hot pot and devilled kidneys. Also spy artist regulars, including Gary Hume, Rachel Whiteread and Sophie Calle. 77-82 Whitechapel High Street, E1; +44 (0)20 7522 7888; www.whitechapelgallery.org

BERLIN

PARIS BAR

Very "starving-artist-meets-bistro- dining-in-Pigalle in the 50s". This funky Charlottenburg restaurant is big with writers, musicians and actors. Speciality dishes include *steak frites*, while the art includes work by Sarah Lucas and German enfant terrible Martin Kippenberger who used to eat here. *Kantstrasse 152; +49 (0)30 313 8052; www.parisbar.de*

COPENHAGEN GI. MØNT

In this buzzy bistro, Norwegian lobster and Danish caviar are top dishes and emerging artists from Copenhagen adorn the walls. *Gammel Mønt 41; +45 331 51060; www.gammel-moent.dk*

ZURICH

KRONENHALLE Enjoy, Swiss, Bavarian and European cuisine in the brasserie-style banquet halls, decked with works by Matisse, Picasso, Miro and Braque. *Rämistrasse 4; +41 44 262 9900; www.kronenhalle.com*

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