

The Scots make festival feasts Number One

Joseph Connolly travelled to Edinburgh to indulge in two different yet satisfying restaurants

Enjoy ...! It seems mandatory these days for all waiting staff to command you to do this thing. It's the new 'have a nice day', and was particularly in evidence last week in Edinburgh, where I've been going up to the Festival for many years – the spirit is infectious and the city, of course, quite wonderful. Locals really do relish playing host to the world's biggest and best arts festival, and for three weeks every summer the city throbs and swings, day and night. And while I have never been short of food (as if) still I have always been thwarted in my attempts to secure a table at one of the city's five Michelin starred restaurants – and so this year I went up just a week before, in order to make sure of two of them.

Number One is a supremely warm and stylish place in the basement of the Balmoral Hotel, this magnificent pile perched with majesty above Waverley Station. The Balmoral – one of Rocco Forte's very select European chain – is the best hotel in Edinburgh by quite a long way. The Calzedonian used to be great, but now – under the auspices of Hilton – it's rather cold and very corporate. The Scotsman – in the building that used to house The Scotsman newspaper – is frankly a bit of a mess: the layout is baffling, the atmosphere stifling.

The Balmoral, by contrast, allows you to relax into the caring arms of a true professional: all is welcoming, relaxed and perfect. In the Palm Court – replete with lady harpist – my wife and I had a Royal Wedding Tea. This wasn't a throwback to Wills and Kate, but in honour of last Saturday's splicing of the horsewoman and the rugby player in Canongate Kirk on the Royal Mile – a uniquely beautiful church just next to Ye Olde Christmas Shoppe and a wee bit down from a gift shop called Thistle Do Nicely. Bang opposite is a seller of tweed, pushing heav-



■ Chef Tom Kitchin with Joseph Connolly at The Kitchin restaurant in Edinburgh

A sensational terrine of chocolate and apricot was one of the finest I have ever had – brilliantly spiked by fresh basil, which really does work

ily their 'Princess Diana memorial tartan' and plastered in pictures of that lady ... but maybe nobody noticed. A huge marquee was being erected in the courtyard of the Palace of Holyroodhouse, where the Queen laid on the reception.

Chic and dainty

What, I wondered, can be her opinion of the affront literally on the doorstep of the Palace that is the Scottish Parliament? I think it the most hideous and truly disturbing building in the whole of the British Isles: this defiantly asymmetrical concrete abomination is randomly studded with rocks and protruding poles and silhouettes of what looks like a

series of Morphy Richards hair dryers, while the whole is so askew as to resemble the aftermath of an earthquake: it makes our own Royal Free Hospital look both chic and dainty.

Number One is the most calming restaurant I have been to in ages. Wine lacquer walls, deep carpet, velvet upholstery – handsome big tables a mile away from your neighbour: the welcome and attentiveness throughout is exemplary.

Jeff Bland is the very able chef here – probably best appreciated by way of the tasting menu with appropriate accompanying wines, though my wife and I went for the three course a la carte dinner at £62. She enjoyed a

highly unusual starter: golden and baby beetroot with a froth of goat cheese, verjus (grape) jelly and beetroot puree: the presentation – in common with every dish here – was masterful. Her Dover sole was a handsome fillet elegantly curled into a cylinder and served with special fennel, choron sauce (bearnaise with tomato) and Israeli couscous. She adored this: "the couscous explode with flavour: superb". I had two obscenely luscious scallops caught off the Isle of Mull with crunchy curls of Iberico ham and a novel chorizo crumble. My fillet of beef was generous and fine, the accompanying oxtail truly magnificent – as was the deep and intense bordelaise sauce. There was also a sweetbread – but I don't care for sweetbread: it is the pancreas, which in both looks and consistency resembles a stupid person's brain.

Puddings took the form of slow cooked cherries with honey and fennel mousse and a rather weird sounding goat cheese sorbet that was ultimately a very unlikely triumph. A sensational terrine of chocolate and apricot was

Fact file

■ NUMBER ONE

The Balmoral, 1 Princes Street, Edinburgh. Tel 0131 557 6727.

■ Open daily 6.30 – 10.30

■ Food: ★★★★★★☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★★★★

■ The Feeling:

★★★★★★★☆☆

■ Cost: Three courses £62.

Tasting menu £69 plus £50 for wines (last order 9pm).

■ THE KITCHIN

78 Commercial Quay, Leith, Edinburgh. Tel 0131 555 1755

■ Open Tue–Thu 12.15 – 2pm, 6.30 – 10pm. Fri–Sat 12.15 – 2pm, 6.30 – 10.30pm

■ Food: ★★★★★★☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★★★★☆☆

■ The Feeling:

★★★★★☆☆☆☆

■ Cost: About £210 for a three course meal for two with wine.

one of the finest I have ever had – brilliantly spiked by fresh basil, which really does work. Sprinkled among these peerless courses were no fewer than three rounds of very special amuse bouches Three! Good God – how amused can one bouche be? Ours, by the end, were laughing like drains.

The Kitchin (so called because it is owned by the Scottish celebrity chef Tom Kitchin – geddit?) could not be more different in terms of ambience. The room seems almost purposely ugly – dark sludge green walls, no pictures, utilitarian furniture, zigzaggy shelves with silly things on them and lighting so gloomy it is a strain to read the menu.

We had a table close to the semi-open culinary powerhouse – so a fine view of Kitchin in his kitchen (proof that he can stand the heat) but also the unsettling constancy of a stream of waitresses swinging to and from the pass. They looked very dinky though, the waitress-

es, even if they did have the slight air of being school prefects – pinned up hair, black opaque tights and sweet little kiltlets.

The cooking, it must be said at the outset, is quite superb, the menu a la carte only, and one of the most expensive I have ever seen. It is supplemented by seasonal specials, and that's where I grazed: a ravioli of Newhaven lobster with Scottish grolles and herb beurre blanc looked quite beautiful and was a true taste sensation – sublime, as was my wife's sauteed ceps with soft boiled egg and pork collar, which exuded unimagined flavour.

Hysterics

Then a very interesting cut of both chop and fillet of lamb, finished in a cocotte with hay to impart a beguiling smokiness – and carved at the table by no less a figure than 'Tom himself' ...! Crumbs. My wife thought this the best lamb she had ever tasted, and I – who nicked some – agreed. My roasted guinea fowl with red pepper piperade was also very fine – the crisped up leg particularly so. And throughout, of course, our two greedy little bouches had been periodically sent into hysterics – the initial chilled pea soup being quite outstanding.

After so much fine dining, my pudding – mint chocolate chip ice cream sandwich with Scottish raspberries and jelly – was no more than very nice. My wife did rather better with 'prunes marinated for eight months a la Madame Koffman', which does not mean that the great chef Pierre's missus was actually present in the marinade herself – well no of course it doesn't.

So if in the next couple of weeks you feel like a feast at the Festival, here are the two of the very best places to go. Enjoy ...!

■ All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk

Heath foraging with Matilda Moreton



This forager's favourite makes berry good summer treats

Though blackberry season is traditionally associated with the return to school in September, the sunnier, south-facing fields of Hampstead Heath are already providing a treat, and the berries will continue to ripen throughout August until school starts.

The preservation of this forager's favourite takes many forms, but the most appropriate to summer is one of



the least known – blackberry cordial. You can add this to

fizzy water or sparkling wine to keep you cool through August. If it turns out rainy add it to hot water and enjoy the benefits of its vitamin A and C content.

Pick as many berries as you can and cover them with white wine vinegar. Leave to stand, in the fridge for 5-7 days, stirring occasionally.

Strain through muslin into a pan and boil up with

sugar (or honey if you prefer), then leave to cool.

Keep in a dark place in sterilised airtight bottles.

Failing left over French lemonade bottles, you might like to drink some Grolsch instead of cans of lager and use those bottles instead.

In case this doesn't sound punchy enough for you, here is a recipe for blackberry vodka cordial.

Blackberry vodka cordial

900g blackberries

450g sugar

375ml bottle vodka

Chilled soda water, to serve

■ Place the blackberries, sugar and vodka into a large clean glass jar. Seal and invert to combine. Set aside in a cool place, turning occasionally, for 2 days or until the sugar dissolves.

■ Pour the blackberry mixture

through a fine sieve into a bowl or jug. Use the back of a spoon to press firmly to extract the liquid. Discard the pulp. Transfer the blackberry cordial to a clean bottle or jar and place in the fridge until serving.

■ Serve the blackberry vodka cordial with chilled soda water.

■ Either way, you'll enjoy the beginning of the blackberry season.