

DINING OUT WITH  
**Moira Hodgson**



## No Nightmare in This Kitchen: Gordon Ramsay Gets It Right

"You only get one shot at New York," Gordon Ramsay told me when I interviewed him in London two years ago. "That will be the biggest test of my life. And until I have a crack at it, I'm sleeping with one eye open. But one thing I'm not afraid of is intimidation."

That's good, because critics already had their knives out within days of his opening in the London NYC Hotel six weeks ago. Is it going to be like Alain Ducasse all over again?

There are plenty of reasons to go after Mr. Ramsay. We're tired of hyperextended, jet-setting celebrity chefs, aren't we? Mr. Ramsay's foul mouth and fiery temper are legendary, and cleverly marketed on TV. He has an empire of over a dozen restaurants, from Tokyo to Dubai, with more on the way (his place in Chelsea is the only one in England that has three Michelin stars). Now he wants to add another notch to his belt: New York. So how much time will Ramsay spend in the kitchen?

He was here on two of my four visits, during which I ate my way through the seven-course tasting menu, the à la carte menu, and dined at the more casual London bar. The kitchen is overseen by Mr. Ramsay's chef de cuisine, Neil Ferguson, who has been with him for more than a decade.

To get to the restaurant proper, you walk through a lively, crowded bar, serving small plates. The bar is decorated in white, soft grays and blue, and now boasts a large silver Christmas tree. The formal dining room, through a pair of heavy frosted glass doors, is similar in size to the one in his Chelsea restaurant in London, with 45 seats. At night it feels a bit like a boudoir in a 1940's movie, with shimmering panels made of pale green lacquer that look like Lalique glass (one-way mirrors, joked a friend) and silk sconces. By day, the panels are turned around to display English-garden scenes hand-carved onto wood, providing suitable gravitas for the business lunch. The tables are well-spaced and set with comfortable chairs; there's no music and the lighting is soft. There's no buzz either, but the room doesn't feel stiff, partly because the staff are relaxed and friendly, as well as knowledgeable. It's hard to pin down the customers: They're a cross-section of all ages and backgrounds, from high-spirited young office workers in expensive suits to portly gastronomes. The buzz comes when Mr. Ramsay, dressed in his short-sleeved kitchen whites, works the room.

If you're looking for far-out creations or mad-scientist-in-the-kitchen fireworks, you won't find



The latest notch in Gordon Ramsay's belt.

them here. What you'll find instead is perfectly executed modern French cuisine, elegant and subtle, with deeply concentrated tastes and flawless presentation.

Upon sitting down, thin baguette toasts arrive alongside ramekins of chicken liver and foie gras mousse under a sauternes jelly and truffled goat cheese. Mr. Ramsay's signature follows: a heavenly cappuccino of white beans with truffled froth.

The tasting menu, rather pretentiously named "Prestige," consists of seven courses for \$110—not excessive considering today's prices. Of course, it may go up. But this menu was perfectly paced, not too much or too rich, light and delicate, but still "a bite" to eat. There's also a chef's table for eight in an alcove in the kitchen. For \$1,700, plus wine, you can watch the cooks at work and taste a specially prepared menu.

Sommelier Gregory Condes presides over the excellent wine list and suggests wine pairings. He's also helpful with suggestions in the two figures—even the lower two figures.

Some of the highlights include scallops layered with slivers of potato and strewn with black truffles, a mosaic of seafood in a tomato consommé with caviar, and pan-fried filets of red mullet. The latter come with grapefruit on a purée of fennel with tiny radishes and fennel fronds. A garden on the plate. "You could sell a million books with this on the cover," commented one of my friends.

John Dory with baby zucchini, slow-roasted eggplant, parmesan and a sauce vierge is great for summer, but out of season now. Halibut is larded with smoked salmon; a confit of lemon and smoked horseradish velouté save the dish from blandness. There is also a pot au feu made with silken pieces of pigeon and an amazing "cannon" of lamb: rare, meaty slices with a confit, eggplant and candied onions.

Mr. Ramsay is skilled at juxtaposing fish with meat, using a wine sauce the way a painter might put dark lines around a subject to emphasize it. Turbot is cooked in St. Emilion, served with pommes purée, braised salsify and baby leeks, and surrounded by a civet sauce. The same principle is applied to the halibut served in the bar, on top of a stew of spiced beef with squid. Glorious roast sweetbreads arrive on a warm fricassee of artichokes with cèpes and slivers of black truffle in a cabernet sauvignon sauce. Another sauce, made with balsamic vinegar, is served on the side, cutting the richness of the dish.

Desserts are sensational, a grand finale, beginning with a "pre-dessert" (like "pre-boarding" in an airport?). It consists of a small glass layered with caramelized pineapple purée, vanilla yogurt and pineapple granité, and topped with candied cilantro, like one of those flag drinks sold in bars. Slow-baked quince, a cross between pear and apple, comes in a glass with crème Catalan, Pedro Ximénez gelée and acacia honey granité. At the bottom, the rich taste of the honey with its floral, meadowy taste comes into play, with mint. A bitter chocolate cylinder is filled with a coffee granité topped with ginger mousse: You taste foam and then a get crunch of praline underneath. And there is a great tarte tatin for two, mounded with caramelized apples on a feathery crust.

Mr. Ramsay looked harried as he patrolled the room one afternoon. A customer asked him how it was going. "Well, Per Se wasn't built in a month, was it?" was his reply. Just six weeks into his New York venture, however, Mr. Ramsay has managed to re-create the wonderful meals I tasted in his Chelsea restaurant.

### GORDON RAMSAY AT THE LONDON

★★★★

151 WEST 44TH  
212-468-8888

*DRESS: Jackets required in dining room, preferred in bar*

*LIGHTING: Soft*

*NOISE LEVEL: Fine (no music)*

*WINE LIST: Excellent*

*CREDIT CARDS: All major*

*PRICE RANGE: Lunch, three-course prix fixe, \$45; dinner, three-course tasting, \$80; seven-course tasting, \$110*

*LUNCH: Daily, noon to 2 p.m.*

*DINNER: Daily, 5:30 to 10:30 p.m.; until 1 a.m. at the bar*

★ GOOD  
★★ VERY GOOD  
★★★ EXCELLENT  
★★★★ OUTSTANDING  
NO STAR POOR