

GourmetLONDON

DECONSTRUCT THIS

*The craze for 'deconstructed' dishes needs to end,
 argues food critic **Charles Campion***

Illustration by Dale Edwin Murray

Nothing strikes fear into a diner's heart so quickly as seeing the word 'deconstructed' applied to a dish. The briefest sighting will confirm your worst suspicions. The chef who is cooking your food wants to be cutting edge; he or she wants to be trendy; he or she will be aspiring to Molecular Gastronomy even though Heston Blumenthal has quietly moved on.

On the face of it, deconstructed dishes sometimes sound attractive – instead of making a boring old lemon meringue pie the deconstruction devotee plates some lemon ice cream with a biscuit and some piped foamy meringue. Undoubtedly ingenious, this assembly may even look pretty on the plate, but for me it misses the point. A classic lemon meringue pie is a thing of great beauty: whisper crisp sweet pastry, a gooey, lemon-curdy filling and a meringue top barely set and singed after its trip to the oven. As you take a forkful, you savour fine combinations of taste and texture, and the whole experience is much greater than the sum of its parts. When a dish is as good as this why does it need deconstructing?

The unpalatable truth is that chefs long to be thought of as intellectuals, and they're the ones who think deconstructivism will gain them respect as well as perking up

their kitchen creativity. The reality is that simply making the classic dishes well can be testing, and developing a sly, ironic version which changes key ingredients around and aims to shock may well be an easier option. Classic flavour partners – bacon and eggs; fish and chips; lamb and spring vegetables – have been around for a long time, and after pleasing people for a couple of centuries they have earned their place in the gastronomic pecking order. Surely it is just screaming arrogance to think that tinkering and deconstructing will make for a better eating experience? That's not to say that both cooking and gastronomy must remain static for ever, dishes do evolve and change, but ever so gradually and chefs should respect that pace rather than trying to hurry things along. So saying, it would take a card carrying killjoy to rule against all kinds of menu playfulness and fun.

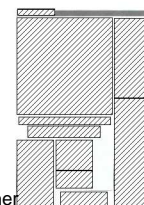
Occasionally a dish can be so outrageous and so off the wall that it makes you chuckle. At Sixtyone, the recently opened restaurant in the Montcalm Hotel, chef patron Arnaud Stevens had 'Rabbit Bolognese, salsify and almond' on the opening menu. So far so good. Rabbit is not usually served as a ragu but it doesn't sound that spooky an idea. Only when the dish comes to the table do you realise how far off piste it

really is. The rabbit ragu is a small pile in the centre of the plate – very delicious, the rich sauce making the most of the lean rabbit – then there is the element that looks like tagliatelle but turns out to be a roll of salsify strips cut to look like pasta. And finally there is a bowl of ground almonds that stands in for Parmesan. This isn't deconstructivism. You cannot work your way back from any Italian pasta dish to a combination of rabbit, salsify and almonds. This dish is actually that great rarity – something new, and it works very well, good flavours, good textures, and a pretty good joke.

As with so many fields of human endeavour (and it is worth noting that 'deconstructivism' was first applied to literary criticism and architectural theorising), some great truths apply, such as the old adage that if you want to break the rules, you first have to know what they are. Too many chefs think that they are Heston Blumenthal and that they have only to steal his vocabulary and ideas to be equally prosperous and successful. If the diner queries the merits of deconstructed dishes, he or she ends up pigeonholed in the Gastro Luddite section and discounted.

Deconstructed dishes should carry a bold health warning: 'This dish is a rehash of an old and much loved classic; only choose it if you don't mind an ambitious chef fooling around with something that's hard enough to get right in the original version'. ■

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