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SIXTYONE

A sense of playfulness is behind a creative menu that's much more than meets the eye at Sixtyone, a joint venture between Searcys and chef-patron Arnaud Stevens. *Janie Manzoori-Stamford* reports

The depths of Marble Arch, a thriving corner of London's West End, doesn't immediately conjure up images of friendly neighbourhood restaurants. But in Sixtyone, on Upper Berkeley Street, a road with a remarkably large residential population, that's what you'll find.

That sense of surprise is at the heart of this partnership between Searcys and chef-patron Arnaud Stevens, who first joined the upmarket caterer in 2002, cooking at the Royal Opera House and the Gherkin, after periods spent at La Tante Claire, City Rhodes and Maze Grill.

Sixtyone is housed in a space leased from the Montcalm Marble Arch hotel, but while it can be accessed from the hotel lobby, it's very much a standalone operation with its own dedicated entrance. The modern interior, designed by Tonik, is chic but understated, a character assessment that could also be applied to the menu.

Take the mussels, bread soup and suckling pork belly (£7). It sounds simple enough, but as Stevens explains, there's more to the dish than diners might expect.

"The velouté is predominantly stock and milk, so when it's poured, it's really light. We add a quenelle of white chocolate ganache, infused with garlic and thyme, and this acts as the cream and nicely blends the soup," he says. "I don't mention it on the menu, because I don't want to be perceived as odd or quirky. The waiter explains the dish as it's presented to the table, and I know it works."

Another starter, described as crisp Dorset oyster, chicken caillette and shallot (£9), also offers a lot more than meets the eye. The caillette – a mince of ingredients including chicken wing, Poilâne breadcrumbs, Swiss chard, piquillo peppers, pine nuts and Alsace bacon – is served with a Dorset oyster, chosen for its large size, which is lightly floured, coated in panko breadcrumbs and fried at the last minute. The accompanying shallot emulsion is served in the oyster shell, with the intention of looking very much like the oyster that is now on the plate.

"There's a lot of prep that goes into many of these dishes, but actually sending it is very straightforward," says Stevens. "[Richard] Corrigan used to say 'service is about assembly'. That's what it should be about."

TASTING MENU

Alongside the à la carte is a six-course tasting menu (£45/£75 accompanied by wine), which changes according to the ingredients that come Stevens' way from his favourite suppliers. "We always serve good cod, but if we feel it's ultra-exceptional that day, we'll put it on because we want to show it off."

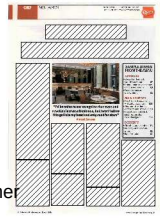
The tasting menu kicks off with "snacks", which Stevens describes as "mushrooms on toast with a bit of coffee" – another playful interpretation from the chef. The ritual at the table begins with diners being asked how strong they like their coffee. The waiter then adjusts the amount of dehydrated and powdered ceps accordingly before using it to infuse a hot dashi of mirin, sake, kombu, bonito flakes, soya, mineral water, satsuma and pumpkin, using a glass and wooden Chemex coffee filter. This is served with sourdough toast and a light, whipped, mushroom parfait made from all the trim that's been collected from the kitchen prep.

"I didn't want to just give soup served in an espresso cup," explains Stevens. "We're trying to be creative and exciting, but also realistic about costs. My head chef Killian [Lynch] and I came up with this after looking around the fridge and thinking: 'what's here on a regular basis that's not going to cost us any money, but can make our guests really happy?'"

Describing the cuisine at Sixtyone as "moreish food that has a little bit of refinement to it", Stevens eschews any temptation to define his cooking as fine-dining. It's an approach that has won the restaurant a steady stream of regulars from the local area and a place on the radar of the guide books.

"I'd be naive to not recognise that stars and rosettes increase business, but I won't allow it to get into my head and only cook for stars," he insists. "We're cooking for people that want to visit on a regular basis. But don't get me wrong; if we get a star I'll run down Upper Berkeley Street completely naked!"

→Sixtyone
61 Upper Berkeley Street, London W1H 7PP
www.sixtyonerestaurant.co.uk



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Arnaud Stevens

SAMPLE DISHES FROM THE MENU

STARTERS

- Cheltenham beetroot, Cashel Blue, walnut £7
- Octopus carpaccio, red pepper confit, sorrel, sesame £9
- Rabbit, bolognese, salsify, almond £8

MAIN COURSES

- Roast Herdwick mutton loin, wild garlic, Jersey pearls £23
- Slow cooked sea bream, carrots, walnuts, grapefruit £18
- Braised beef cheek, black pudding, pancetta, Swiss chard gratin £19

DESSERTS

- Chocolate, yuzu, mandarin £8
- Rhubarb, white chocolate, ginger £9
- Banoffee parfait £7

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