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BY TOBY L. WHITE ON APRIL 20, 2015

LONDON RESTAURANTS

I've long been of the opinion that restaurants in city hotels are unnecessary; why dine where you sleep when you have a whole culinary scene to discover? This may have been true, however, when all that was offered was a rather pedestrian 'filler' dressed up as fine dining until, of course, certain hotels began turning their culinary services over to celebrities. And then we reached a point where you wouldn't even know there was a hotel attached to the restaurant you were dining at. I won't mention any names but,

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suffice to say that chefs didn't so much as announce themselves – their names over the threshold – as take over. So we were left with two choices; hotels with sub-standard restaurants, or restaurants with an ego bigger than a hotel.

It was this latter phenomenon which accounts for why I was surprised to learn that Sixtyone was attached to the little-known terraced London enclave, The Montcalm. I should have suspected from the decor. Unless they're trying to make a statement, hotel decor can be spotted a mile off; it's reassuring in its predictability. There was nothing offensive about Sixtyone's mis-en-scene; it wasn't daring, trendy nor outlandish but straight-forward, sophisticated and conducive to dining. The only oddity being a large photograph of a highland cow on the wall opposite our table, glowering at us as if daring us to order the steak. The venue itself was, in short, not trying to impress. It also suggested that the emphasis might be on the food.



Which it most certainly was. Sat in a window-seat in the corner, the sill was dressed with copies of Hugh Johnson's Wine Companion and tomes by Escoffier. Moreover, empty bottles of Nuits Saint-Georges and Gruaud LaRose suggested they knew what they were talking about. I was there with my now regular luncheoning companion, Larman, a man who knows a thing or two about dining. And, indeed, a thing or two about a thing or two. Thus, save the lack of other diners, any lack of atmosphere was always to be made up for by scintillating conversation.

If you can't judge a book by its cover, similarly, you can't judge a restaurant by its menu. Hang on, that's piffle; of course you can. Invariably, the simpler the explanation, the better the dish. Needless to say, 'Belgian rabbit, pistachio, romaine lettuce' was daringly understated in its potential. It was, in fact, a ballotine of rabbit (I couldn't be sure of its provenance but I'll take it from the chef it was of Belgian extraction), whose

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sure of its provenance but I take it from the chef it was of Belgian extraction), whose nutty core and pistachio dressing suggested an earthiness perfectly complimented by the glass of Maranoa verdelho our man suggested with it. A Portuguese grape from an Australian vineyard, when poured its gooseberry notes hit me like a perfume saleswoman in Selfridges.

There followed 'Yellowfin, shiitake, smoked paprika and spring onion'. I wasn't sure if I'd been given the chef's shopping list instead of the menu itself. But, again, I was outdone. A smoked paprika zabaglione over gently seared tuna and bouncing shiitake bites, it was at once rich and delicate, spicy and subtle, powerful and aromatic. And rich enough to be offered with a delicate pinot noir.

But there's more to this venue than a few exciting turns in the kitchen, as any aficionado of fine dining will tell you, much of what you taste is how it's presented before that first forkful and, here, the presentation was as enticing as any of its peers within the square mile of Mayfair. To have a dish laid before you that elicits an 'aah, it looks too good to eat' from one's dining companion, here was Larman's dessert. Merely a braeburn apple with almond ice cream but, as with each dish before it, presented in such a way as to be admired for a short while before being tucked into. I even did something vulgar that I've not felt compelled to do for some time: I took a photo.



But never mind Larman's braeburn, I was offered the best at the last. Listed, simply, as 'tiramisu' (complete with parenthesis) on the menu, it was, as was fashionable for a time, the dessert deconstructed. And I would have passed were it not for the waiter's hearty recommendation that he'd not tasted one quite like it. Again, that might not normally be enough to persuade one until I learned that he was Italian. But he was right.

Sponge and cream encased in a fortified dome, a tuile of coffee mouse on crushed almond biscuit on the side; if more people knew, this would become a destination for this dessert alone.

Sixtyone's chef, Arnaud Stevens, is not famous. His name is not above the door. The restaurant isn't trading on the hotel's name. The hotel, for that matter, might not even be one you'd readily know. I certainly didn't. There are, indeed, many places that may lay claim to be a 'hidden gem' but Sixtyone doesn't need to claim to be one. It, simply, is.

Sixtyone currently offers a 2-course lunch set menu for £18.

Sixtyone, 61 Upper Berkeley Street, London W1H 7PP. For more information, visit www.sixtyonerestaurant.co.uk.

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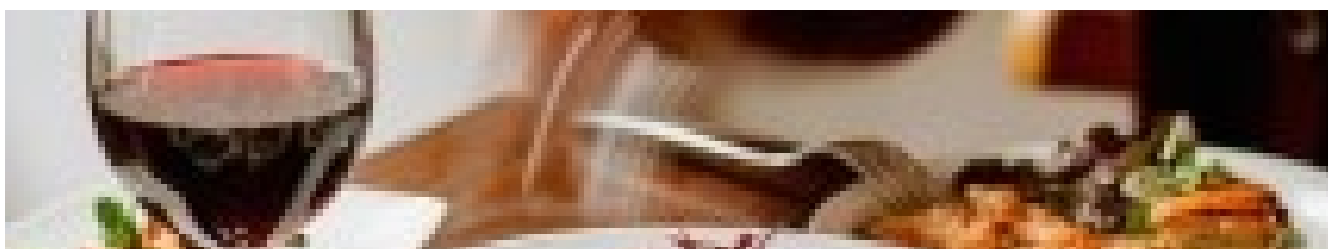




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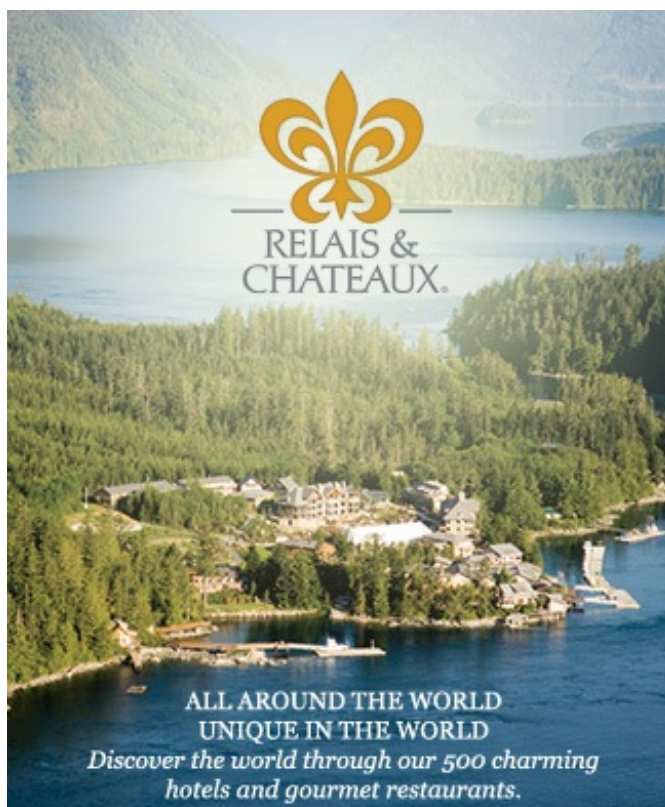


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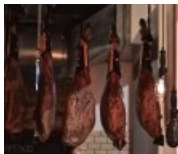
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