



Hippopotamus provides Wellington with a temple of French gastronomy, recalling the days of Le Normandie and Petit Lyon.

Photos: ANDREW GORRIE

Star-spangled eating

David Burton seldom deems a restaurant worthy of five stars across the board. Tres bien, Hippopotamus.

Hippopotamus. There, I've said it once – so we'll hear no more about the wisdom or otherwise of naming your restaurant via a public competition, especially as a makeover by Michael Nalder has largely erased the hippo imagery from the Museum Hotel's third-floor restaurant.

Sober black walls offset a chrysanthemum-patterned carpet, a crystal chandelier hangs in the newly tiled men's loo, and fronting the dazzling mirrored bar are antique French armchairs, reupholstered in a mix of vivid modern patterns.

The francomania extends to the staff: executive chef Laurent Loudeac hails from Brittany, pastry chef Louis Sergeant is also French, and maitre d' Timothee Lepoutre began his career in a four-star Loire Valley hotel.

Zut alors, even the rank-and-file waitrons speak creatively structured *Franglais*.

"We propose an amuse-bouche to begin," says one, setting down the first freebie of the evening – a tiny taste of rock melon, *creme fraiche* and Parma ham, served with a sherry glass of vermouth-laced hibiscus tea. "Please," they all repeat, placing the artfully arranged dishes before you, each with its carefully considered wine match.

Although Le Canard, Le

Metropolitain and Simply Paris all serve us well for cuisine *bourgeoise*, the Museum Hotel provides Wellington once more with a temple of French gastronomy, such as we have not seen since the heyday of Le Normandie and Petit Lyon.

This, however, is contemporary French haute cuisine, interspersing the strictly traditional with Asian-style experimentation.

Hence Loudeac's Salmon Sashimi My Way, with wasabi-*soy gel*, flying fish caviar and wakame salad. I wanted to keep on eating it forever, even though I couldn't really complain about the portion size, five pieces in all. Equally delightful was Seared scampi on saffron cauliflower puree, crispy pancetta, caulifluff and wasabi caviar.

At \$40 apiece, you would expect the fish mains to be fresh and perfectly cooked, and so they both were.

The snapper was classically French, in the sense that it came with diamond clams and crayfish bisque, but the proper was more typical of high-end modern French: served on vanilla and broad-bean risotto, it included crispy sweetbreads and a lemongrass-scented coconut sauce.

Because of the leeway, we afford the culinary artist Loudeac gets away with these cross-cultural escapades, whereas a craftsman like Le

Canard's Pascal Bedel tells me he feels so constrained by the expectations of customers at his bistro that he will soon remove the one Asian-influenced dish from his menu – clams with lemon grass-flavoured pea panna cotta.

Come dessert time, however, Hippopotamus returns to all the creamy, buttery, sugary delights that the French, in turn, have exported to Asia.

First, *creme brulee* – beautifully textured, and served in a wide, flat dish that maximises the surface area of burnt sugar.

Then there's Crepe Suzette. Have our polytechnics got rid of the *gueridon* trolleys with which they used to instruct our budding waiters in the arts of Sole Normande, Steak Diane and Crepe Suzette? Probably, just as retro fashion deems them cool once more.

There's no denying the theatricality of it all: the wheeling out of the trolley, the sprinkling of the sugar over the heated pan, the subsequent additions of orange juice, butter and neatly folded crepes, and finally, the whoosh as the Grand Marnier is flamed.

After all this I was feeling replete – unlike the two large gents at the next table, who having supplemented their entrees and mains with five bread rolls apiece, were

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ONE THING YOU SHOULD TRY

Some say Crepe Suzette was invented for Edward, the future king of England, at Monte Carlo in 1895, and others that it was discovered by mistake when somebody spilt Champagne over their crepes. We needn't believe a word of either story, although the creation date seems about right. Here is my take on Auguste Escoffier's recipe for the sauce: melt 100g caster sugar in a frying pan, tilt the pan at all angles until it caramelises and darkens, add 3 tablespoons Curacao (or Grand Marnier), flame it, then beat in 100g of butter and the juice of one or two mandarins. Add your cooked crepes, folded into quarters, bathe them in the sauce, and serve very hot.

HIPPOPOTAMUS

3rd Floor, Museum Hotel, 90 Cable St

Ph 802 8935

Fully licensed

Open for lunch, high tea and dinner, 7 days.

Price range of mains: \$28-\$42.

Food: ★★★★★

Service: ★★★★★

Ambience: ★★★★★

Wine list: ★★★★★

Cost: \$166 for two, excluding wine.

chuckling in disbelief at their microscopic desserts, which they hadn't realised were just the free pre-desserts.

"Had enough to eat?" I asked one in the lift on the way out.

"Nah," he replied, "I'm off to get a burger at Hungry Jack's – or Burger King as you call it here."

"Are you serious?" I asked. "Absolutely," he replied, "I'm Australian, you see."

A few weeks ago I reported the "demise" of Amigos Latin Restaurant on the corner of Tory and Vivian streets. In fact, the restaurant is still open and the owners say it is busier than ever, particularly on Friday and Saturday nights, when a hundred covers is not unusual. I regret the error.

