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Last updated: March 24, 2012 12:11 am

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Lessons learnt from lunch



By Peter Aspden

The move towards greater simplicity and purity of ingredients is a harbinger of more profound change



Juan Sánchez Cotán's 17th-century still life 'Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber' (1602)

About halfway through last summer, I began to hear murmurings of a new restaurant opening in my local neighbourhood in west London. A gentle, favourable buzz soon began to turn into something more substantial. Prominent food bloggers spoke of transcendent cooking, promising to make return visits as soon as they were able. The restaurant, Hedone, was in an unfashionable part of the Chiswick High Road, tucked between a couple of fast food outlets and opposite an unprepossessing Chinese health spa ("Five minutes to remove moles, warts and polyp [sic]"). As gastronomic destinations went, it could only be described as inauspicious.

Yet the reviewers were insistent: here was a special place, serving immaculately sourced, super-fresh food. It was simple, unostentatious, and unafraid to rely solely on its natural flavours. It didn't come cheap – options for dinner started at £50 – but it was worth every penny, the online consensus agreed.

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Hedone had been opened by a Swede, Mikael Jonsson, who was himself a widely followed and scrupulous food blogger. His website, [Gastroville](#), showed a keen, not to say obsessive, interest in ingredients and their provenance. Now he had given up his day job as a lawyer to practise what he preached at Hedone. Prices notwithstanding, the results were proving popular. I tried to make a reservation, only to find several evenings fully booked. Still, this was part of the beauty of it all. The sweet agony of anticipation is no bad thing in an age of instant gratification.

I finally arrived with my guest one Friday evening late last year and was, truth to tell, a little disheartened. The brick-walled room was pleasant enough, and the open kitchen took centre stage with an impressive air of confidence. But the tables were no more than a foot apart – a pet hate of mine – and the perfectly friendly welcome seemed a little slack. In the kitchen, a

motley collection of staff, not a chef's hat to be seen, swigged casually from water bottles.

We ordered the four-course menu, and its first course was competent enough: a thickish finger of mackerel, served simply, accompanied by nothing more spectacular than a small clump of cauliflower. So far, so unpretentious. I remarked that I had tasted better from the street stall barbecues of Lisbon. But my attention was focused on the course that was to follow, which had sounded extraordinary on the menu: Cévennes onion with pear shavings.

I did not know the Cévennes region of France. Still less did I know its prized onion. But was it really magical enough to carry a course in a high-end London restaurant? The dish arrived. It was as described. A small onion, and some shavings – or were they slivers? – of pear. I sliced into the onion. It tasted of nothing very much. I turned, slightly panic-stricken, to the pear. A pear is a pear. By far the most impressive thing about it was its sliveriness.

It is an unnerving moment, when you have committed expectation, time and money to an experience, suddenly to realise that things are going badly. It can happen in the theatre, on a date, when you first set foot inside a holiday hotel room. You don't want to be disappointed. But you are fighting a losing battle. The hype that has built up inside your head cannot withstand the resolute assault of common sense. So it happened at Hedone. This was an onion and a pear. And this evening was going to cost the best part of £200. The rest of the night was a blur. At one point, I asked my companion if she thought we were being filmed by *Candid Camera*. Or was this a magnificent piece of performance art? But subsequent courses were competent enough. A leg of Sika deer was well-cooked but nothing I could not imagine doing myself. An English blueberry tart was the kind of thing you could pick up at any half-decent bakery.

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The bill, comprising two four-course menus, a (mediocre) cheese selection, five glasses of wine and water, came to £170.94. We were in a daze. I felt like crossing the road to remove my moles, warts and polyp, which suddenly sounded like a wholesome value-for-money experience. My companion expressed misgivings. “All those people rave about it,” she said. “They must know something. We just didn’t get it.”

So this was the new face of dining in London. To give you something so sophisticated in its sheer simplicity that it becomes beyond criticism: to decry its lack of complication is to miss its point. It would be like looking at a modernist building and wondering where the curlicues were, or trying on an Armani suit and wishing those grey pinstripes were in turquoise.

And yet, I know a little bit about food. I have had my senses scrambled at El Bulli, Ferran Adrià’s temple to experimental cuisine in Catalonia that has now closed its doors to become a research centre. In the magnificent interior of Les Ambassadeurs in Paris’s Hôtel de Crillon I have had the haughtiest waiters in the world tenderly explain to me why my choice of wine was misguided. I have waited patiently as an earnest maître d’ described the farmyards that supplied the pats of butter in Napa’s French Laundry restaurant.

Over the top? Perhaps. But memorable, unforgettable evenings. I failed to see how the onion and the pear could live in the same company as those delights. A few weeks after my visit, the redoubtable AA Gill, reviewer for The Sunday Times, awarded Hedone a rare double five-star accolade, for its food and atmosphere. Once more, a mist of self-doubt descended. Did I really not get it? Were my tastes too crude for my local neighbourhood restaurant?

I revisited the bloggers that had brought Hedone to my attention in the first place. I discovered, scrolling down the lists of diners feeding back, that there was something akin to open warfare going on. The battle of the onion and the pear was raging among London’s gastronomes.

From a reader of the very favourable Time Out review of Hedone: “We all (six) began to feel the victims of a food hoax as we ate the tiny slithers of pear and onion put before us.” And: “I simply did not get this meal. Especially the slither of onion and wafer thin slice of pear that constituted a whole course for ‘just’ an additional tenner. There’s no doubt that the guy can source ingredients, but this menu did not please.”

Other readers fought back. “I’m pleased that the reviewers who didn’t like their evenings at Hedone will be staying away (it sounds as though they will be happier at Harvester or McDonald’s).”

On the London/Eater blog, more disdain: “Sadly I failed to grasp the subtlety of this dish. I’m sure I was missing something, but I promise you I tried to shake the feeling of the emperor’s new robes. Was this artistry too refined for my savageness? ... It may have been a great onion of mystical provenance, but frankly, I could not tell.”

But Gourmet Traveller bit back: “Cévennes Onion with Pear Shavings didn’t excite on paper but dazzled the palate with its simplicity – tender, incredibly sweet onions doused in butter and accented with refreshing pear slivers.”

Cheese and Biscuits said that the onion and the pear would be the dish that made up his mind about Hedone. He ordered the added Périgord truffle option

(£15). “To me, it tasted like warm onion and shaved pear with some nice black truffle on top – not unpleasant, just unremarkable. What am I missing here? I am convinced, objectively, that Hedone is a very good restaurant, possibly world-class. But I think I’d rather have a pizza. Sorry.”

. . .

Such fevered debate over food is a recent phenomenon in Britain. Twenty years ago, as the French chef Michel Roux senior described on a recent BBC radio show, the country was living in a gastronomic “dark age”. What happened, he said, “was a total revolution. Not an evolution. A revolution.” His nephew Michel junior, known to millions for his intense and learned pronouncements on *MasterChef*, said the quality of London’s restaurants had made them among the most important tourist attractions of the city. Chefs such as Gordon Ramsay, [Marcus Wareing](#) and [Heston Blumenthal](#) have become household names.

“ We yearn for purer lives. We want to respect the natural world, not embellish it to death ”

Most of the new generation of British chefs were trained in France or by French chefs, subjected to the rigour of producing classical cuisine, which was served in impressive surrounds by formally schooled staff. This was *haute cuisine*, and it was vaguely ridiculous in its self-importance (check out one of *Fawlty Towers*’s greatest episodes, *Gourmet Night*).

But new trends have emerged on the world scene, emphasising qualities such as freshness, simplicity, sourcing. Japanese and Scandinavian cuisine are noted for their lack of complexity. The biggest culinary crime of our time is to “denature” food, to cloak its true flavours with over-fussy treatments and sauces.

Old-school cuisine, frumpy and heavy, is going the way of Victorian dark wood furniture: too solemn, pompous, a relic from a time of different sensibilities. And it is London’s easy absorption of new and different culinary traditions that has made it a global star.

Joël Robuchon, another famous French chef, argued last year that London is the world’s gastronomic capital “because it’s only in London that you find every conceivable style of cooking”. Days earlier, François Fillon, the French prime minister, confessed he had stood up for English food in an argument with President Sarkozy, which is like David Cameron engaging in heated debate with George Osborne over the state of French cricket.

It is tempting, in gastro-sociological circles, to conclude that this move towards greater [simplicity and purity of ingredients](#) that has become such a feature of London restaurant life is a harbinger of more profound change. We are yearning for purer lives. We want to respect the natural world, not embellish it to death. Sustainability has become a more important human value than ostentation. Bling is for vulgarians, understatement for true sophisticates.

We have been here before. The move towards minimalist modernism in the early part of the last century was a decluttering of the cultural traditions that were considered to lack humanistic values and to be entrapped in a hierarchical sense of aesthetics. The musical minimalists of the 1960s were a reaction to dominant styles such as 12-tone serialism which had become abstract, cold, inaccessible. “Less is more” has been, at various times, a

powerful cultural call-to-arms.

Is the desire for simple food a refuge from the bewildering, complex nature of the modern world? This kind of simplicity, it ought to be added, is not reflected in price. Because of the effort required in sourcing the best quality food, it is among the most expensive to be found. But we seem to be willing, if we can afford it, to pay for it. It satisfies a deep urge.

Bee Wilson, prize-winning food writer and author of *Swindled: From Poison Sweets to Counterfeit Coffee – the Dark History of the Food Cheats* (John Murray), says the move towards simpler food is part of a wider cycle. “Over centuries and decades, there have been periodic swings towards more ‘natural’ or rustic food and reactions against the excesses and artifice of *haute cuisine* as decadent,” she said.

“Sometimes, these swings can be understood as part of a wider social or philosophical movement – for example, Jean-Jacques Rousseau included very simple, natural food (pears, white cheese, chewy bread) as part of his philosophy of nature ...

“Other examples would include the original *nouvelle cuisine* of the 17th century in France and the more recent *nouvelle cuisine* of the 1970s and 1980s, even though this ended up seeming even more artificial than the Escoffier-inspired cuisine of sauces that it replaced.”

In the 1950s the French critic and philosopher Roland Barthes was scathing about what he called the “ornamentation” that dominated the French cuisine of the time.

“Ornamentation proceeds in two contradictory ways, which we shall in a moment see dialectically reconciled,” he wrote in *Mythologies*. “On the one hand, fleeing from nature thanks to a kind of frenzied baroque (sticking shrimps in a lemon, making a chicken look pink, serving grapefruit hot), and on the other, trying to reconstitute it through an incongruous artifice (strewing meringue mushrooms and holly leaves on a traditional log-shaped Christmas cake, replacing the heads of crayfish around the sophisticated bechamel which hides their bodies).”

Barthes’ polemic resonates today. The debate over the onion and the pear reflects a wider quest for what we want from our 21st-century lives. We want the open kitchen, the cool staff, the breezy informality. We also want excellence in its most naked form. We are not going to be fooled any longer by bourgeois convention and stiff manners. They belong to the past. Authenticity is what we seek.

It is almost like a science fiction story: in an over-refined world that has been processed, manipulated and genetically modified to its knees, only a simple combination plate of fruit and vegetable can lead the resistance. Hedone’s website describes its menu as “reacting daily” to the freshest produce, as if nature, wild and wilful, were calling all its tunes. It is a pleasing conceit, this subjugation of the civilised world to more primal forces. It reminds us of things we have lost.



I revisited Hedone recently, dropping in for lunch, because I wanted to revisit some of these themes. The welcome was warm, and the vibe was somehow more relaxed. Next to me a group of eight elderly ladies talked eagerly of their expectations. I wanted to warn them about the onion and the pear, but thought better of it.

I avoided the dish, of course. But the meal I had, a £30 set lunch, was delicious. Hedone, a Greek word, can be roughly translated as pleasure. The first time I visited the restaurant I thought its name was part of the joke. But now, as I washed down a perfectly prepared fillet of cod with a flowery glass of Vouvray, I began to get it. Life's most intense pleasures are the most simply described. But they are also the most difficult to attain. And that can cost: money, time and effort. There are worse lessons to be learnt over lunch.

Peter Aspden is the FT's arts writer

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Strange fruit



'Pomegranate of Balance', a still from 'Pomegranate' 2006, a film by Tel-Aviv-born artist Ori Gersht

The photograph, "Pomegranate of Balance", is a still from *Pomegranate 2006*, a film by Tel-Aviv-born artist Ori Gersht. It shows the moment in the film when a bullet slices through the fruit – the moment “when you see something that is still holding together but is already gone” – both obliterating the fruit and enlivening the scene. Gersht is interested in the relationship between violence and beauty, and by representations of reality and how technological invention compels those to change. The photograph makes visual reference to Juan Sánchez Cotán's 17th-century still life “Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber” (1602). This year sees three exhibitions of Gersht's work: currently at the Imperial War Museum in London, at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in September and at London's National Gallery in October.

Matt Ponsford

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christophermartynmeade | March 26 12:45pm | [Permalink](#)
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I find this the thing with fancy restaurants - essentially the pressure to think they are amazing. If you don't like the food you are being served then the impulse is to think it's your fault rather than the chefs. But the thing is, some people out there will never think much of an onion and a pear, period. Christopher Martyn Meade, London

Carolyn Passeneau | March 25 7:17pm | [Permalink](#)
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Just a little upset with on-line Financial Times (FT.com) for not identifying the world famous Sanchez-Cotant painting as being owned by San Diego Museum of Art, where I am a former docent. This is not something that you usually overlook is it?

Sheridan Rogers | March 24 4:05am | [Permalink](#)
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I'd like to know when this era of fawning over celebrity chefs, such as Heston Blumenthal and Gordon Ramsay, will end?

Their culinary tricks and showing-off indicate 21st century decadence...didn't the rise of celebrity chefs prefigure the fall of the Roman Empire?

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