

Food & drink

Jay Rayner

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Being up to date means very little if you fail to deliver, but this new place in Brighton is spot on

The Flint House

13 Hanningtons Lane,
Brighton BN1 1GS
(01273 916333).
All dishes **£4–£14**
(apart from shared
steak at **£42**)
Desserts **£8**
Wines from **£23**

Being on trend in the restaurant business isn't difficult, if you've got a few miles on the clock: sniff the air to work out which direction the robata grill smoke is blowing from; flick through a few mags with a grizzled "I can do that" frown. It doesn't matter that you made your name, say, knocking out a massive

raviolo or ripping off the Tatin sisters. Why shouldn't you now do some ersatz take on somewhere called Asia you don't know much about outside of a sweaty mini break at the Park Hyatt Tokyo? If that's what the Swarovski-encrusted iPhone crowd want right now, give it to them. Buy in a few trinkets wholesale from that department store in Nihonbashi, stack the fridge with Cristal and offer up a menu full of miso-smear cod and dishes that punch you in the face repeatedly with gochujang. Yours for £100 a head.

Being up to date while remaining true to yourself takes more skill. Chef Ben McKellar and his partner Pamela have it. If you haven't heard of them, it's because you don't live in Brighton, where they have run multiple restaurants for the past 21 years. Their places usually have the word "ginger" in the title. It's Ben's way of celebrating his once luscious head of russet hair.

I first ate his eminently trustworthy food at the Gingerman inside the mildly formal Drakes Hotel in 2005, and then again in 2008 at a laid-back pub called the Ginger Fox just outside Brighton. Back then, there was a touch of St John to his cooking. I still mutter wistfully about his toast fried in duck fat, laid with horseradish cream and pink folds of roast beef. He might put a mince and onion pie on the menu, but raise the humble to the extravagant, or put a cake of crisped pig's head alongside slices of fillet. His dishes have always been on the plate what they promise on the menu.

And now here's the shiny Flint House, in a new development within the city's Lanes. It's seemingly unlike any other McKellar outpost before, which may explain the absence of "Ginger" in the title. Upstairs is a dining room and cocktail bar looking out over the Brighton rooftops. Downstairs is dominated by a counter around a fully open kitchen for those who like a bit of nerdy cooking theatre. Thrill to the induction hob with its plancha fitting; perv over the Thermomix and the Pacojet, and the prepped ingredients waiting in their plastic pots for their moment.

It's all polished surfaces and sharp angles and yes, of course, small plates because everything is right now. They do not take bookings, because this is meant to be



Chocolate and pistachio parfaits sandwiched within a biscuit shell alongside cherry cream are both fun and clever

Pier review: (from left) parfait sandwich; and inside the Flint House in Brighton's new Hanningtons Estate

a restlessly modern venture that you fall into and out of at speed. So far so modish. Don't be distracted. Dig through the unstructured menu, its belt unloosened to the last notch. Take in the nods to Spain and Italy. The bit of the menu headed encouragingly "Fried/toast/snacks", for example, includes ham croquettes with saffron mayo, which feels like a departure from his overtly British agenda. But you'll still find the big fat McKellar thumbprint: it's about solid dishes that don't sacrifice substance for looks. The béchamel in those croquettes isn't just flavoured with ham; it's spun through with ribbons of the stuff, as if determined to make its point.

Rock oysters are dressed with an apple and cider-vinegar granita, which makes them brisker than they might already be. We watch a hunk of hispi cabbage being seared on the plancha, until the edges are browned and toffee-like. It comes with a thick, mustardy ravigote sauce below and an autumnal leaf fall of crisped golden onions above. Courgettes are browned and pelted with handfuls of pine nuts and a dollop of confit garlic. A slab of treacly bread is toasted and laid with Ortiz

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Special mention: (from top) hispi cabbage; fried courgettes with pine nuts; sugar pit ox cheek; and lamb belly with peas

> anchovies, the brand name a reassurance. There are rings of lightly pickled onion to send it on its way.

As with Ortiz, so with Hannan, the Northern Irish meat producer, who ages his beef in a room lined with the shimmering pink of Himalayan salt. I'm still to work out exactly what the salt does, but I know the beef is exceptionally good. Like some terrible brand fetishist, I relax when I see his name on a menu. A serious cut of that beef is the most expensive dish here at £42 (for sharing). There's also his ox cheek, cured to a rosy red and given a ride through a sugar pit, to produce something on more than nodding terms with the very best maple-syrup-sweetened bacon. There's a toasty onion purée beneath. It needs the heavy grating of nose-slapping horseradish to tip it away from cloying. And then there are rings of hugely flavoured lamb's belly, from an animal with proper time on the hoof, crisped and perched on a pile of the freshest of peas and dressed with more anchovy.

For dessert there is muscovado sugar crème brûlée. Apparently, there are blackcurrants in there, too, but all I get are the sultry, caramel tones of the brown sugar. I am rarely convinced that there is much point trying to improve upon a classic vanilla crème brûlée, and this one doesn't change my mind. Far better is a block of chocolate and pistachio parfaits, pushed together and sandwiched within a biscuit shell alongside a cherry cream. It's both fun and clever. It's lunchtime and, to the disgust of many reading this, I'm off the booze. Instead I have a glass of their own rhubarb soda, and feel almost virtuous, even though I surrendered my virtue years ago.

My job is to ramble through as much of a menu like this as I can, and I do put my back into it. But sometimes you need to step back from such an experience and work out what it's for. Over the years the McKellars have run businesses built around the special occasion; restaurants where milestones are marked and devotion is proved. The Flint House is not one of those. It's about a couple of satisfying dishes, rather than the works. It's a restaurant that makes its point one dish at a time so that what could seem at first to be just a nice enough lunch or dinner, turns out to have been rather more than that. And every town really could do with a place like that. ■



Wines of the week

Alsace wines to lay down – or drink right now.
By David Williams

Domaine Albert Boxler Riesling Grand Cru Sommerberg France 2014
£45, *The Wine Society*

Ask winemakers what it is they think is so special about wine, and a majority will say something about the way it captures like nothing else the essence of a certain place at a certain time. This high-minded attitude isn't always easy to sustain. So much wine is really no more special than anything else: it might be worth drinking, it might be disgusting, but it's on those terms – rather than any quasi-mystical relationship between man and the natural world – that it should be judged. Sometimes, however, there are bottles that really do seem to have the magical time-and-space travelling effect. Albert Boxler's riesling is one such: a gorgeous swell of mellow orchard fruit over a steely frame of acidity that takes me right back to the single, singular vineyard where it is made.

🐦 @Daveydaibach

Domaine Rolly Gassmann Gewürztraminer France 2016
£24, *Berry Bros & Rudd*

Thoughts about the complex causal web of place and time in Boxler's Sommerberg Riesling were prompted by tasting three vintages of the wine back to back. The expansive

2014 is more immediately appealing on the day than the tighter, tauter 2013 or the honeyed 2012. But in a week, a year, or a decade's time? I wouldn't like to say. You can buy all three from the Wine Society if you want to perform your own experiment. I'd be curious to put a few bottles of Rolly Gassmann's Gewürztraminer away, too, for a similar experiment. It's another white wine that shows off the French region's ability for making white wines of spine-tingly spicy intensity, with a heady mix of lychee, rose garden and ginger that will only get more decadent as the year's go by.



Exquisite Collection Alsace Pinot Gris France 2017
£7.49, *Aldi*

Alsace does a neat line in accessible and accessibly priced varietal wines – wines for drinking young, enjoying the way they capture the essence of a single grape variety.

Gewürztraminer's uninhibited puffs of rose perfume and exotic fruit, for example, are given full rein in the succulent Tesco Finest Alsace Gewürztraminer (£9); while Cave de Turckheim Riesling Vieilles Vignes 2015 (from £11.69, Rannoch Scott) has riesling's swish of acidity and bright, tangy lime and lemon zip. The region's take on pinot gris (aka pinot grigio) is also worth looking out for. I enjoyed the fresh and fragrant peachiness in Aldi's version, while Domaine Schlumberger's Les Princes Abbés Pinot Gris 2016 (from £17.49, Tanners) serves its crystallised citrus and quince richness with polished charm.



Notes on chocolate

Cold weather calls for hot chocolate, says Annalisa Barbieri



I like this time of year, with its huddling clouds and lack of outdoor expectations; autumn is the most at-peace-with-itself season. It is also the start of hot-chocolate weather. You can make really good hot chocolate by simply breaking your favourite chocolate bar (without bits in) into small pieces and then whisking it into warm milk. I take this further by using chocolate ganache as a base – 100g of 70% chocolate, 75g of milk chocolate and 225g of cream all melted in a bowl atop a pan of simmering water. When done, store in a jar in the fridge and when needed, dollop a large tablespoonful into a pan with some milk, heat and whisk. You don't need much.

I like my hot chocolate small and punchy – more molten

chocolate than milky drink.

My favourites, after weeks of testing, are **Misco's** Hot Chocolate Drink; **Simón Coll's** Chocolate a la Taza 60% cocoa with vanilla; **Hotel Chocolat** 50% milky and 70% dark; **Zotter's** little bars with adventurous flavours (honey cinnamon/coffee cardamom) for the more outré, and **Pump Street's** just launched single-estate 75–85% hot chocolate flakes. I've worked out that if you make it at home, 37g of powder/flakes to 250ml of milk is the perfect combination.

Out and about there are two places that I search out for my hot-choc needs: **Carluccio's** for its Cioccolata Fiorentina and **AG Lifestyle** in Suffolk. I've heard amazing things about **SAID** of London's hot chocolate, but have yet to try it.