

AMUSE BOUCHE The Magic Ingredient

Think of your favourite restaurants and why you like them. Chances are it isn't just about the food (although the quality of the food is, of course, a vital factor). Instead, many different elements need to be brought together before a restaurant can charm a discerning diner like yourself. Setting, mood, service, d'cor, location and creativity have their part to play. So do a host of ineffable little criteria. Does the chef have a good story to tell? What about the restaurant's history and character? How does the kitchen handle unusual requests? Is there a

buzz or a certain cachet about the place? The kitchen can do the best it can, but real magic only starts to happen when factors like these are working together in harmony.

For proof, you need look no further than Hong Kong's great restaurants. In a culinary scene as competitive as this, restaurateurs must truly excel if they're to pull ahead of the pack. Hong Kong Tatler has always championed the city's fine dining, and in this special feature we take a look at what makes a good restaurant great. Bon appetit!



QUIET LUXURIES

The nature of luxury is changing. Out goes gaudy opulence, in comes a wealth of simpler pleasures – like good food, good wine and the company of friends

Diplomat by background, wine cellarer by profession and gregarious by nature, you'd expect Gregory De'eb to be regular fixture on the Hong Kong restaurant circuit. But, in fact, the onetime head of South's Africa's mission to the territory eats out selectively, preferring to socialize in the more intimate confines of a friend's dining room or kitchen. "Our dinner invitations are predominantly at the homes of our friends and at various private clubs, owing to the long-standing and close relationships that we tend

to have," he says. "When we are entertaining, this is predominantly done at our home or at the cellars."

The cellars De'eb refers to are the Crown Wine Cellars, the state-of-the-art wine storage facility (and private members' club) he established with logistics and removals tycoon Jim Thompson. Housed in a former World War II military facility known as the Deep Water Bay Bunkers, the business boasts six underground cellars, a clubhouse comprised of two underground bunkers and an elegant

conservatory. Superintending all of this keeps De'eb on a tight schedule, while wife Cecilia logs in demanding hours in her career as a doctor; no wonder the two are picky about the restaurants at which they'll choose to spend precious couple-time. "I think I'm the more adventurous eater," says Cecilia.

Apart from the food, it's authenticity and a personable attitude – rather than glitz or fleeting fame – that lures the De'eb's to a restaurant's door. This opting for the best, instead of the brashest, is a particularly

modern idea of luxury, and one that Harlan Goldstein, chef-patron of the eponymous restaurant, understands well. "I think what I'm known for is a very relaxed atmosphere, one that's unpretentious and very focused on high quality food," Harlan says. "At Harlan's, we have a special attention of detail when it comes to service. I know what my regulars' eating preferences are, how they like their food, how they like their wine. I give a personal service."

Gregory De'eb, who counts Harlan's as a personal favourite, can vouch for it. "Harlan is always there in person," De'eb points out. "He takes the time to greet you and chat to you as a friend." Not surprisingly, a warm atmosphere prevails at Harlan's whenever the De'eb's are able to drop by for dinner – as they happened to do recently.

"A place has to have a story as well as a great location," says Gregory, of the things he looks for in a fine dining experience. "Does the chef have some romantic background or tale to tell?" (Harlan, who arrived in Asia in 1991 with nothing more than a few hundred dollars in

his pocket, does have that tale, in case readers were wondering.) "And does he come out and get to know you?" Gregory continues. "People are coming to value experience, contact and knowledge far more than branding. The whole business of being flash is fading."

There's certainly no need for flash at Harlan's, where the sheer quality of the ingredients speaks for itself. "Other restaurants use inferior products and charge cheaper prices," explains Harlan. "Myself, if I go out and you charge me

\$400 for lamb, I don't care so long as the lamb is good. I go around the world looking for the very best ingredients."

The very best was certainly brought to bear in the dinner enjoyed by the De'eb's. Starters comprised Middle Eastern-inspired tuna tartar (with pine nuts, green chili, mint, pickles and grilled flat bread) and Harlan's justly famous foie gras with apple sorbet and a port and fig jus. "Look at this slice of apple," says Gregory of the latter appetizer. "Harlan's a bag of ideas and it reflects in his food." The two main courses of hand crafted pasta with smoked Sardinian eel (plus crispy garlic chips and chives), and a wood-stone roasted Barramundi (served Spanish chorizo, pesto and baby greens) were triumphs of good, unpretentious cooking. Desserts of iced "cappuccino coffee cloud" panna cotta and crispy rice brought the dinner to a memorable peak, to be followed by Scharffen Berger warm chocolate cake, mint chocolate ice cream and sesame seed sticks. "People will remember the last thing," smiles Harlan, "so you have to slay them with dessert."



Top: Ice Cappuccino Coffee Cloud, Panna Cotta and Crispy Rice
 From left: Foie Gras, "3" Apples and Port Wine Fig Jus; Hand crafted Pasta, Sardinian Smoked Eel, Crispy Garlic Chips and Chives;
 Wood Stone Roasted Barramundi, Spanish Chorizo, Pesto and Baby Greens



"Ninety-nine percent of what makes a good restaurant is whether staff are up to the job," says De'eb. "At Harlan's, the food is wonderful, creative and will tempt a wide variety of palates, and most importantly, the staff are friendly and welcoming. The fact that he's there is great – it's not just the wine or food. These little things make the evening a bit nicer. It's the personal approach." Reflects Harlan: "I have a motto – 'Harlan's is where dining is an experience.' It's about the service, lighting, music, environment, the wine list, the food. You have to know how to plan the menu so that it's memorable." Experiencing the very best, in a personal setting, is the new luxury in other words. The one thing you can safely schedule some hard-earned leisure time for.

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