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By Tom Hay

Getting a taste of Van Zeller

Tom van Zeller's eponymous restaurant on Harrogate's Montpellier Street is barely as big as an art boutique. It's a good setup for a perfectionist; a size which lets an ambitious chef patron keep an eye on each dish and an eye on every table. Intimate, it is also a little mysterious, with dark wood floors and subtle lighting bestowing upon it a touch of the palm reader's table, or the conjurer's lair. Fitting, because this 34-year-old with his sights set squarely on a Michelin star does seem capable of whisking up a little culinary magic.

As the new custodian of this Food and Drink page, the place delivered a series of firsts which call my qualifications into serious question. My first taste of truffle, thinly sliced and curious, like scattered cross sections of a tiny brain, its taste and feel conjuring thoughts of musk and earth and wood and wax. There was my first taste of an edible foam, which, in the mouth, offered the bitterness and smoke of lapsang souchong tea with the wispy texture of soap suds; a lesson that watching Great British Menu and Masterchef are not the same as eating actual food.

"...it may yet seduce a Michelin judge."

And it was also my first tasting menu - an ingenious format which allows you to eat two-thirds of a starter many times in a row, thereby giving your chef room to show off as many techniques as he likes. This was the vegetarian tasting menu - a rarity - and it did what so much veggie food fails to do: abandoning the notion that there must be some meat-like focal point or mass of starch, and instead celebrating what the ingredients can do.

The result is a succession of tastes and textures, sprinkled, squirted, spread, dabbed, balanced and otherwise artfully arranged alongside complimentary tastes and contrasting textures. Pickled beetroot,



Salad of pickled beetroot, Chantenay carrots, chestnuts, Yorkshire Blue cheese and a charcoal biscuit crumble. (S)

sweet chantenay carrots, mealy chestnuts, faintly fungal Yorkshire Blue cheese and a moreish, crunchy soil of charcoal biscuits. Beautiful puy lentils, tiny glazed root veg, celeriac fondant, parsnip crisp, garlic puree; the harmonious flavours of a winter roast. For dessert, a geometrically perfect strip of quivering blackberry delice - mousse on a sponge base - and a parallel structure of crisp, contoured pastry, so delicate it might fracture at a mere glance.

And yes, that may be a full length photo of him holding a fish aloft which greets you at the entrance, but Van Zeller himself is twice as approachable as you might think, and only half as cocky. It's not arrogance

which put that picture there, nor placed his name on the door, nor set the prices where they are. It's flair and ambition, the desire to stamp his identity on the place and say: "Here, this is me, this is my food".

And though this writer currently lacks the fine dining experience to properly criticise, to whinge because the waiter seemed rushed (he didn't) or the seats were drafty (they weren't) or the mallard was underseasoned (it wasn't), he thinks he can see where Tom van Zeller is headed, provided he stays on track. Harrogate may yet seduce a Michelin judge.