



(NEW RESTAURANTS)

## COMPTOIR AND CUISINE

IS IT A SHOP? IS IT A BAR? IS IT A RESTAURANT? IT DOESN'T MATTER; THE ONLY LABELS YOU NEED CONCERN YOURSELF WITH HERE ARE THE ONES ON THE BOTTLES, SAYS **JESSICA CARTER**

**G**rowing up by the seaside, fish and chips was, for me, one of the main food groups. I'd bury my nose in that hot paper parcel to inhale its vinegary fumes, impatient to get home, slather it in ketchup, and wash it down with a cold can of Coke. Of course, tastes change when you grow up, and although a chippie tea is still one of my favourite suppers, I've curbed the Tommy K habit somewhat, and that only-for-a-treat fizz has been swapped for a different kind...

Bubbly is greasy comfort food's best pal; the crisp flavour and rough texture of the bubbles cleanse the palate and reset you for the next mouthful. Visiting Bath's new Champagne-focused bistro, I learned that the same is true of other rich, guilty pleasures too – like the sticky toffee pudding I ended my meal with. To be fair, when I asked for a recommendation of what to drink with the decadently stodgy pud, I should have known they were hardly going to bring out a list of sweet wines.

Champagne and Fromage is the flagship brand from four French expat pals, who opened their first joint in London



eight years ago. Obviously, that venture was rooted in their keenness – which most of us can share in, whichever side of the Channel we're on – on the French delicacies of fizz and cheese. But, perhaps even more than that, they wanted to give Champagne a bit of a rebrand, and convince punters that saving it just for celebrations is a sad old waste.

Their newest opening, Comptoir and Cuisine in Bath, takes this ethos even further, promising versatile, artisanal, grower-made Champagnes, and blending the range with a collection of small plates and a lifestyle shop, selling unique, retro homewares items as well as ingredients.

As such, there are several layers to this novel little spot. The entrance takes you straight into the shop, while the descending stairs off to the side lead to a dark and moody basement bar with decoupaged walls and clusters of low-hanging lamps. Down here it's all about the Champagne, with 36 of varieties on offer (including some by the glass), as well as cocktails and a couple of beers.

But where's the food at? You'll find the bistro at the back of the shop up some steps (there's a second cosy dining room on the floor above, too, which doubles up as an events space for masterclasses and tastings). Fashionably weathered floorboards are covered in Persian-style rugs, and rustic wooden tables and old-school furnishings fill out the cosy, characterful space, while framed posters and vintage



mirrors hang on the walls. Très chic. It's here that the menu of nibbles, small plates and sharing boards is served.

The 100-percent Chardonnay bubbly makes a dry and easy-drinking aperitif, but – as the team fully intend to show – works really well paired with the food, too. The sharing board of three cheeses, three cured meats and two tapenades (£25) is presented just so, with chutneys, gherkins and even maraschino cherries dotted about to enable intriguing flavour combinations. Accompanied by sliced baguette, it's a well-chosen selection and great fun to hopscotch our way through.

The pan-fried beef onglet (£8) arrives as a chunky, just-this-side-of-fall-apart slab of cow (the school dinner-style knife we're armed with can just about cut through it), doused in chimichurri. The green sauce has a depth of well-melded flavours; instead of being poky and bold, it has a gentle, slow-burning heat which allows us to still taste the great quality meat.

A Jerusalem artichoke gratin (£5) is cheesy, oily and stodgy in all the right places and makes sharing a bit of a struggle, while the fried celeriac with black truffle mayo (£3.50) is good value and generously proportioned. The batter – super crisp and not too greasy – is well seasoned with a lift of salt, making the spindly golden fingers moreish in the extreme. The accompanying black-flecked, creamy truffle mayo has a well-balanced hit of pungency, which could easily have been over done.

Everything is served on mismatched vintage crockery by super-laid-back (not to mention very well styled) staff. These guys really know their fizz, too, and create a chilled out atmosphere to encourage punters to ask questions and join them in their boozy geekery. We're more than happy to oblige them. ■



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