

Restaurant review: James Sommerin

by Guy Laffan



This is without doubt my favourite restaurant in Wales.

Not only does it hold a Michelin Star, but it just so happens to be on my doorstep! James Sommerin rose to fame in 2010 when he appeared on the *Great British Menu* alongside the likes of Tom Kerridge, Tony Singh and Daniel Clifford, who are all culinary heavyweights. Although his trademark starter 'Pea' didn't make it to the final banquet, it still went down a storm and gave him incredible notoriety.

Born and raised in South Wales, James started his cooking career at age 12 in the Italian restaurant Chez Giovanni, Newport. Aged 16, he moved to Scotland to work at Farleyer House Hotel under the guidance of head chef Richard Lyth, who taught him the understanding of seasonality, quality and the essence of flavour. While in Scotland, he met his now-wife Louise and they now live with their three daughters back in South Wales. James started working at the Crown at Whitebrook in August 2000 as sous chef and became head chef in late 2003. In 2007, whilst at the Crown, he obtained his first Michelin Star that he retained until it closed its doors in 2013. James then decided to open his own restaurant in Cardiff, situated on the Penarth Promenade. Its seafront position boasts the most incredible views of the Bristol Channel and you can even see Weston super mare. The interior décor is clean and well thought-out. Splashes of turquoise give the whole place a very modern and vibrant feel.

Since opening its doors, restaurant JS has been an incredible success. It has a long list of accolades, gained in a very short time. Needless to say, the Michelin Star is its greatest achievement to date. One of James' more recent proud moments was when his 17-year-old daughter, Georgia, asked if she could start



The main dining room with window into kitchen

working with him in his kitchen. He had always hoped one of his daughters would follow in his footsteps and so he was over the moon. His wife and daughter are both ever-present in the restaurant and it really does have a family-run feeling about it, which I for one love.

On our most recent visit to JS we decided to tackle the chef's table, a 14-course taster menu. Yes, 14! The sheer diversity and range of ingredients is astonishing and the whole menu is a mystery, as explained by the waitress when you first sit down. The chef's table itself is situated in the kitchen, right in the thick of it. Even when you're sat in the main dining room you can see into the kitchen through a large window. It's a completely open plan, giving the whole place a really spacious, light and airy atmosphere.

With so many cookery programmes on the TV these days, we are always led to believe that behind the calm and collected front of house there is pandemonium in the kitchen. It couldn't be further from the truth at JS. The entire kitchen is as calm as can be, and I suspect it's because the staff is so well versed in everything it does. Absolutely everything is ordered and precise. Each dish has at least five elements on average that are all separately prepared in its own dedicated pan at different sites in the kitchen, which are all magically and

seamlessly assembled at the last minute, plated by the man himself.

They set the tone nicely with a three-element *amuse-bouche*. A cheese profiterole, mild cheese soufflé with puffed seeds on top, and a semolina cracker anointed



with taramasalata and micro herbs. This really sets the bar high from the off. The seasonally inspired, locally sourced dishes start coming thick and fast, but they cleverly leave 20 minutes between each dish just so you don't feel uber stuffed. (If you haven't done the math yet, we spent five hours there.) So it really is a gastro-nomic marathon, but it doesn't leave you reaching for that top button at the end.



The beautiful James Sommerin restaurant



Pea ravioli

Our first of the starters was James' signature dish, 'Pea,' and it's obvious to see why it did so well on the *GBM*. The dish is a large ravioli filled with a pea volute on a bed of crushed peas, topped with crispy sage, pancetta and a parmesan foam. It is simply sensational and truly a dish you don't want to end.

There are four starters, two of which were completely veggie—which I loved. We had two separate dishes consisting of at least three elements of artichoke and celeriac. Who would have thought you could do so much with such simple ingredients? The constant supply of homemade bread is hard to resist, but I made sure I tried all four kinds on offer. With so many courses it's impossible to not lose track of where you are, and if it weren't for the running commentary of the chefs you would be truly lost.

The mains are just as sublime as what precedes them: multielement, precisely plated and powerfully punchy flavours. One of the dishes was lamb in all its glory with a sauce so rich it made my ears ring. We then had sea brill, which was basically the beach on a plate, and wood pigeon with a variety of berries and textures. Each dish is plated so perfectly that it's almost a shame tucking in.

We had four desserts ("only four?" I hear you say). It's a real dessert lover's paradise. First we had a palate-cleansing lemon dessert enhanced by plumes of citrus dry ice smoke billowing across our table. It had several elements including a sorbet, meringue and oatmeal crumb that worked perfectly together.

We then had flavours of raspberry and blackcurrant, covered by frozen separated raspberry cells that were mind-blowing in their explosive taste and simplicity.

The piece-de-resistance is 'Bakewell'. An almond soufflé tower that rises at least 3 inches out of the ramekin, accompanied by an ice cream quenelle on a spoon. The idea is you plunge the ice cream through a hole in the top and let it melt with the rich cherry base, forming what I can only describe as sweet cherry perfection.

JS is such a calm and unpretentious setting and having eaten in restaurants that have earned two or three Michelin Stars, I can honestly say this place is on par. It doesn't have the theatre like the Fat Duck, but it's refined with no smoke and mirrors.

Sommerin is an absolute master of his art. Sitting, watching and talking to him was an absolute pleasure. The added fact that it's a family-run affair makes it so much more appealing than your average high-end restaurant. They really have propelled this place into the elite world of fine dining and I can't wait to see what the future holds for the team. With a hotel and cookery school in full operation, it's obvious they are an ambitious family.

Next time you're in Cardiff, get yourself to James Sommerin before getting a reservation becomes impossible. ■



Georgia Sommerin serving dessert with James in the background



The hotel rooms above the restaurant