

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN EXPLODING AND MELTING

DAVID HILLIER visits La Reserve, the fine Paris hotel whose impeccable service and two-Michelin starred restaurant, Le Gabriel, leaves him lost for words

It's 11.50am and I've not had breakfast yet. I'm pacing through the door of my hotel suite because I said I would be down to eat in twenty minutes; that was forty minutes ago. I know I'm in a luxury establishment and the use of my time should be my prerogative, but I hate being late; I'm never late.

"Sir, do not worry," says the host hovering magically by the lift's opening doors as I step out and splutter an apology for my tardiness. He opens his palms a little, smiles like an old friend and I'm instantly at ease. "It's Saturday."

His reply is indicative of the attitude that permeates every second of my stay at Paris's La Reserve, situated just one road removed from the pomp and bustle of the Champs-Elysee. Opened last year by the French hospitality guru Michel Reybier, the hotel's sole aim is to make me feel at least as comfortable as I am in my own home. And to play by my own rules: by the time I'm sat down to eat in the dining room, with its sumptuous chairs decorated in bronze and tea rose covers and peach and white marble pillars, it's well gone midday.

I'm not eating so late because I've been up all night carousing in the City of Lights, but instead I've been losing minutes and hours indulging in the most divine art known as relaxation. Sure, I rose a little late - somewhere after nine - but when you're sleeping on La Reserve's sumptuous king sized beds, it would be a fallacy to not linger a little longer amongst the gleaming white linen.

From my room it's to the basement spa, decorated throughout in an invigorating, crimson red, and a swim in the 16 metre pool. It's only after a few lengths that I notice that quietly and without beckoning the plush cream curtains that run parallel to the pool have been drawn, and I am swimming in total privacy.

After this I take in a facial, after which my tired, winter-battered skin tingles pink in appreciation. The array of Nescens products that are applied soften it and soothe. When my 50 minutes is up I leave the room in an ecstatic woozy daze, like I've been relaxed to a point two steps from reality. Perhaps wisely I go and sit on the plush couches lining the pool, and take in a tea and lemon.

Eventually, a desire for food drives me up to my suite and out again, I've been told its Saturday - though every day at La Reserve is like Saturday if I'm honest - and I'm eating poached eggs smothered in butter thick hollandaise and knocking back vivid, earthy red and green fruit detox shots. Suddenly visions and remembrances of last night's meal wash over me.

La Reserve's signature restaurant Le Gabriel has just earned two Michelin stars - a staggering achievement when you consider it only opened in February 2015. Head chef Jérôme Bancelet

has worked with some of the finest exponents of French gastronomy, including the great Alain Senderens at Lucas Carton, and his extensive education is apparent in every perfectly framed plate of food.

We have the tasting menu, and throughout it's a lesson in elegant deception. Take our first course: Norwegian salmon, smoked eggplant, lemon. Three main components perhaps, but with one mouthful you are guided through a succession of contrasting flavour profiles - fish, smoke, sweetness, sour. Unexpectedly, the final flavour to be delivered is that of a gentle heat, almost horseradish, which we later discover is created by pimentons.

It is the first of many nods to a Japanese influence in Jerome's cooking. This is most prevalent in our final savory dish of the evening - candied veal with creamed polenta. The outside of the velvety, succulent meat is a sweet, sticky glaze that virtually reflects the light emanating from our table's candle. Whilst eating I do the thing I always do when something - art, music, food, sport - takes me to the rarified Nth degree. I start laughing. Giggling. Not at the food per se, but because the food is perfect and I don't know what else to do.

It's the second time I've done this in the last hour - the first was during our fourth course of sea bass, carrot ravioli, carrots and orange juice. Again, minimal ingredients that have been crafted together with both a lightness of touch and sureness of intention. The carrot raviolis circumvent the fish like tiny red puckered dummies; the mixture inside is a little like creamed carrot, but one so creamy and so carroty that it stumps both me and my companion for an appropriate adjective. Eventually we alight on the rather cumbersome 'somewhere between exploding and melting' and though that's something of a mouthful it's honestly right.

Our food throughout is thoughtfully matched with wine - the aforementioned candied veal pairs particularly well with a strapping 2009 Les Pagodes de Cos - and it's around this time that, in the face of all this rampant gestation, one can succumb to grogginess in many restaurants. Thankfully the lighting in Le Gabriel is tailored perfectly - the mood is low, come-hither, helped by the embossed leather on the walls imported from Cordoba - but the spotlights and candles all ensure that no-one's sitting in gloom and guiltily contemplating the softness of their king-sized bed.

Fast forward a day and I'm zipping back to London on the new e320 Eurostar train, and it's clear that the trains have been pulled into the 21st century. Wifi abounds, there's sockets at every seat and the touch free glass doors whir open automatically - perfect for tottering back with a glass of red.

I'm realise I'm not 100% sure what day it

is, so complete has been my deep dive into La Reserve's hospitality. Is it still Saturday? I ask a companion as we alight at St Pancras. "Yes Dave, it's still Saturday," they reply. I'm pleased, but then rue the fact it's going to be long time until I have another Saturday quite like this.

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LA RESERVE

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