

DINING WITH A WELSH ACCENT

CHEF TOM SIMMONS MAY NOT BE DISHING UP PURE WELSH CUISINE AT HIS LONDON RESTAURANT, BUT IN A NOD TO HIS HERITAGE, MUCH OF THE PRODUCE HAILS FROM WALES. GISELLE WHITEAKER DINES OUT.



Top: Chef Tom Simmons.
Above: Welsh produce shines on the Tom Simmons, Tower Bridge menu.

Despite an abundance of top-notch produce, it's rare to see Welsh cuisine featured in the upper echelons of gastronomy. Welsh rarebit and Welsh cakes may have made their way into the vernacular, but you won't find them on the menu at high-end dining establishments. Welsh flavours, though, deserve a place at the table. That's where Tom Simmons comes in.

The Pembrokeshire-born chef, who reached the quarter-finals of *MasterChef: The Professionals* back in 2011, hasn't defined his eponymous London restaurant as Welsh, but there's definitely a focus on produce sourced from Wales. Tom says his earliest memories are of roaming farmers' markets, foraging in the countryside, and harvesting his mother's vegetable garden. These memories come to life in the creative cuisine he's dishing up at Tom Simmons, Tower Bridge.

While provenance is on every chef's lips these days, Tom goes out of his way to establish close relationships with suppliers and farmers, ensuring high-quality produce as a result. Then he lets the produce shine. A quick glance at the menu is enough to confirm the Welsh influence – Welsh spring lamb loin, Pembrokeshire chicken and Welsh beef all make an appearance. There's even a lamb cawl – a Welsh broth. It's not all Welsh, though. Tom is influenced by both British and French cuisine and many of the dishes combine elements of both.

If the cocktails are anything to go by, dinner here is going to be noteworthy. I quaff a 'Wisgi' – say it out loud – which is a deep, slightly sour combination of Penderyn single malt, apple brandy and walnuts, while my dining companion, Elio, has an unpronounceable 'Ffrwyth'. This concoction blends vodka, almond, cranberry, cinnamon and egg white, with a sprinkle of raspberry dust on top, tasting like cherry blossoms in a glass.

A few sharing plates make their way to the table: mushroom croquettes with chive mayo and parmesan; tea-brined fried chicken with lime mayo and sesame; and whipped cod roe with sourdough crisps that are light and airy, like the love child of an ice cream wafer and flatbread. Popping a croquette into my mouth, I pause. I'm tempted to ask the waitress to just bring me a plate of that. Then I try the chicken bite and my taste buds are blown away. The cod roe



Chips so good they should be compulsory.
©Jade Nina Sarkhel



Orkney king scallops.



Burrata Pugliese.



Peanut butter parfait.

is also delightful, light and fluffy but fully flavoured. "I'd like to lick that bowl," Elio says. I tell him I'm doing my best as I scrape the remaining dip onto a crisp. These light bites have set the bar high.

We've elected to share our starters, moving to Scotland for some Orkney king scallops served with confit chicken, sweetcorn and an onion bhaji. It's an unusual mix of flavours that works well: the sweetness of the plump, buttery scallops moderated by a hint of Indian spices. Italy also makes an appearance with Burrata Pugliese. The perfect orb of smooth Burrata is paired with heritage squash, crispy kale and roasted nuts. None of these are flavours I've seen buddied up, yet together, they balance flavour and texture into a satisfying whole.

For the main, we've opted to go all Welsh. The fillet of Welsh beef is a relatively new addition to the menu, but is proving popular. I can understand why. A trio of medium-rare beef slices rests next to a large mushroom, with pearl onions and spots of thick, creamy Béarnaise. There is also a cube of lardo potatoes that is no doubt calorie-laden, but worth every joule. The Welsh spring lamb loin is plated with a ball of lamb kofta and spiced aubergine, the Middle Eastern flavours highlighted by the addition of smoked yoghurt.

While these dishes would have been enough without sides, the waitress suggested we try the chips, waving away my objections. These are not ordinary chips. They are thick chunks of potato, crispy on the outside and soft in the middle, flavoured with garlic butter, parmesan and thyme.



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Top: Tom in the kitchen
©Jade Nina Sarkhel.
Above: Plating is performed with precision.
Below: Tom Simmons, Tower Bridge features unpretentious décor.



The restaurant is cosy and welcoming.

They're not a side, they're a necessity. They really should be compulsory as testament to Tom Simmons's skill. If you can make an ordinary potato taste like that, you're onto a winner.

I was once told that if a chef does savoury dishes well, their desserts may be below par. Generally, savoury dishes are imprecise, the flavours layered with a bit of this and a dash of that. Desserts, on the other hand, tend to be the opposite, requiring precise measurements to get the right effect. The almond frangipane blows that theory out of the water.

Picture cubes of pressed apple terrine with a dab of Madagascar vanilla, topped with caramelised almonds and paired with a tangy Granny Smith sorbet. It's tangy, yet sweet, dense, yet light, sweet, yet not too sweet. The peanut butter parfait is another surprise, with single origin chocolate wrapped around light squares of peanut butter parfait with salted caramel that melt in the mouth. It could be too much, too rich, but instead, it is the perfect finisher.

The Welsh theme may be subtle in Tom Simmons's dishes, but it's there and there are traces in the décor, too: the tables and chairs are made from Welsh oak; there's a photograph of a Highland cow taken on a Pembrokeshire farm; and on the walls, there are pictures of shoes, stitched by his shoe-artist mother in Wales. This is a restaurant that speaks multiple languages, but always with a Welsh accent. ■

INFO

For more information about Tom Simmons, see www.tom-simmons.co.uk

HERE ARE SOME OF OUR FAVOURITE WELSH DINING SPOTS:

Ynyshir

Ynyshir is a Michelin-starred restaurant on the coast of mid-Wales near the Snowdonia National Park. Welsh ingredients on the menu include Wagyu beef from Montgomery, lamb from Aberystwyth, duck from Fishguard, strawberries and eggs locally, and vegetables from Anglesey. Chef and co-owner Gareth Ward also produces his own supply of oils, pickled stems and powders made from wild garlic. This is in addition to the birch trees in their grounds that are tapped into for birch water, which is reduced to make birch syrup. www.ynyshir.co.uk



© Tim Green

Blas

Blas, at Twr y Felin in St Davids, offers a menu influenced by the season and locality, with dishes designed to reflect Wales and its produce. Pembrokeshire is the perfect provider, with Welsh lamb, duck and fowl farmed in the area, and crab and many species of fish caught daily in the surrounding seas. The popular activity of foraging has promoted the use of traditional ingredients, such as samphire and laver bread. Pembrokeshire is also home to several award-winning cheese producers, such as Caerfai Farm, within walking distance of Twr y Felin. www.blasrestaurant.com



James Sommerin Restaurant

James Sommerin Restaurant is a smart yet laid-back Michelin-starred restaurant on the esplanade in Penarth, which affords panoramic views over the Severn Estuary. The restaurant specialises in skilfully crafted modern dishes with a well-judged blend of complementary textures and flavours. The family-run restaurant uses only the finest ingredients, locally sourced where possible, and James cites his grandmother as his inspiration. www.jamesommerinrestaurant.co.uk



Tyddyn Llan

Sitting in rural North Wales, near Chester, Llangollen and Wrexham, Tyddyn Llan is considered one of Wales' finest restaurants. The restaurant is committed to fine seasonal produce, arriving daily, with local meat and game sourced through a vigilant butcher and fish straight from the coast. It's Welsh produce as much as possible. The dishes on offer for lunch and dinner are created daily to reflect what's in season, and what's really good to eat. www.tyddynllan.co.uk

