



# DUCK, DUCK, GO



AT THEIR NEW BERMONDSEY VENTURE TRIVET, THE FAT DUCK ALUMNI JONNY LAKE AND ISA BAL STEP AWAY FROM THE INFLUENCE OF MENTOR HESTON BLUMENTHAL WITH AN IDIOSYNCRATIC, INVENTIVE MENU AND INGENUOUS WINE LIST THAT EARN THEM A PLACE AMONG LONDON'S TOP TABLES

Words: Chris Allsop

I'm sitting in the airy, golden-hued surrounds of Trivet in Bermondsey's Snowsfields, while owners Jonny Lake and Isa Bal – both previously of Berkshire's award-winning The Fat Duck – resist my efforts to pigeonhole their new restaurant.

"How would we describe the cuisine?" Lake muses behind thick-rimmed spectacles, not entirely unlike those of Heston Blumenthal's, his old former boss. "When you look at restaurant guides, there's always that category with generally meaningless titles like 'Modern British' or 'Contemporary European'.... I guess we could just say that, and then people would be okay."

They laugh. Next I ask about their interest in biodynamic and natural wines, to which master sommelier Bal smiles beneath his soufflé of curly grey-black hair. "I actually like the wine to be good more than anything else."

So it's quickly established that these are not men overly concerned with fitting in.

"Why 'Trivet'?" In a city of Sexy Fish, push-for-champagne buttons, and 12ft samurai warriors the name – for a common three-legged cooking utensil once used to keep pots away from open coals – seems refreshingly down-to-earth. This observation seems to please them, as did the discovery, while they were researching trivets on Wikipedia, that its 'arrangement of three legs is the most stable apparatus over uneven ground'.

"We were like, oh, yeah, okay," Lake laughs. "Opening our own restaurant in London right now – that's about the most uneven ground you can probably get."

It's an observation that makes their gimmick-free launch all the more surprising. But then, that ignores their cachet – Bal was group head sommelier and Lake executive head chef when The Fat Duck was named number one on the World's 50 Best Restaurants list. Their low-key approach chimes with the sense that these are pros not pursuing celebrity, but excellence. In fact, so respected are they that within the first month of opening, a stream of chefs – including Pierre Koffmann, Simon Rogan and Tom

Bal was head sommelier and Lake executive head chef when The Fat Duck was named the world's best restaurant



Kerridge – all popped in to check Trivet out.

Later, as I peruse Trivet's heavyweight bar menu, which offers everything from wagyu tongue to Ligurian braised rabbit, Bal (a former Best Sommelier in Europe title holder) pours me a champagne aperitif. I ask him if he has any nerves about striking out on his own.

"I don't do nerves," he smiles, sounding a little like an assassin.

Following the opposites-law of partnerships, it may be that Lake is the more anxious one, but after producing precise, world-leading cuisine day-in, day-out for more than a decade, probably not. Trivet's menu is an expression of their teamwork – the pair worked on each dish together, their relationship now such, according to Lake, that they can say anything to one another without worrying how the other might take it.

I consider the significance of that while exploring the relatively short à la carte list of five starters and five mains. Perhaps they don't agree too often. An à la carte is also a surprise from such doyens of tasting menus. But wanting a change of pace is understandable at 47 – they're the same age – and they claim to have never wanted to open a "once-in-a-lifetime restaurant".

Just as well, as the enticing menu is resisting my attempts to whittle it down. My starter, when it arrives, is an architectural marvel – a rose of truffle slices rising out of an upturned artichoke heart, encircled by a moat of sourdough broth. It's autumn on a plate – homey and warming – with tangy notes from the tiny fermented radishes. For all its loveliness, it does leave me wanting a little more – and that little more is the puffini across the table.



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There's been a lot of social media hoo-ha over Trivet's Hokkaido potato and its roast pigeon – we'll come to those shortly – but, for my money, the puffini is where it's at. Its origin is in the panini machine Lake and Bal inherited from the excellent Londrino – the previous inhabitant of the space. Head chef Michele Stanco (also previously of The Fat Duck) shoved some puff pastry in the machine, and – with the addition of onion-infused sour cream, pea mousse, caviar, and a mirin sabayon dip – the puffini toasted sandwich was born. Its richness is beautifully balanced by a wild bitter salad comprised of whatever the restaurant's forager brings in that week.

Just as we're considering cancelling the mains for extra puffini, along comes the pigeon on our server's gleaming copper tray. It's one of the most fragrant mains I've eaten, the meat seasoned with Malagasy white pepper and the dish infused with three different preparations of persimmon. The melting tenderness of the pigeon is chiefly achieved by marinating the bird in yoghurt and milk. It's good enough to make me forget the puffini for several minutes, and it pairs very nicely with the spicy, plummy bottle of Turkish büyülüba shah 2012, which is a good time to talk about the wine list.

Of course, with Bal presiding, this is no ordinary wine list. Diners of a certain wealthy Orange County-tourist ilk will ask if they can buy a copy, I'm sure. Produced like a coffee table tome, its two-inch-thick yellow spine is embossed with the word 'cellar'.

Within, Bal, in an effort to make a less "transactional wine list", has arranged the wines (ranging from £28 to around £1,000 a bottle) as a way of illustrating the history of wine-making, so we get Armenian and Turkish wines early on, with a playful 'Mars wines' section at the end (sadly empty). Beyond Mars, is the currently 20-strong sake section, to which Bal seems particularly dedicated. I discover, at Bal's recommendation, that the Kimoto Junmai Daiginjo 'Tuxedo' is dynamite as a digestif.

If you'd prefer a more gateway sake experience, summon the Hokkaido Potato dessert with its sake gelato and white chocolate and sake mousse. While the slightly charred mohawk of potato crowning the intricate mille-feuille didn't bowl me over visually, it's a heavenly dish of strange and subtle charms.

For all the menu's brevity, you'll want to come back and try everything (reserve a table in the room with the open kitchen, for the better ambiance). It's like a tasting menu masquerading as an à la carte. Seasonality will affect the menu's components, but Lake's in no rush to switch out dishes. He shakes his head at the thought of chefs with daily changing menus, lamenting that "dishes never have a chance to become better". As to how to pigeonhole the cuisine, well, there are influences from everywhere, but they belong to only one place. Happily for us, that place is in Bermondsey. ■

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