

Bisque on Bolton with chef Stephen Morris (below) and the rum savarin (opposite page)



Wellington

BISQUE ON BOLTON

★★★★

Bolton Hotel, cnr Bolton & Mowbray Sts, ph: 04-462 3770, boltonhotel.co.nz
Breakfast, lunch and dinner, 7 days
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Before New Zealanders got proper restaurants, we dined at hotels. These were mostly owned by the two big breweries, who regarded food service as nothing more than a tiresome burden, imposed as a condition of their liquor licences. Hence, the food was bad and the service even worse: dinner was "on" at the dot of six and off again at eight, when by law the hotel dining room had to close.

As a result, nowadays a hotel is about the last place middle-class New Zealanders would choose to dine, which perhaps explains why so few of our celebrated chefs clamour to follow the example of Gordon Ramsay at The Savoy in London and set up their own restaurant within a hotel, no matter how prestigious.

A notable exception is Wellington's Bisque on Bolton, owned by local hero Stephen Morris, who has cooked for the Queen at Huka Lodge and won a



string of awards. His restaurant is on the mezzanine floor of the five-star Bolton Hotel and fitted with the same contemporary artworks and elegant suede chairs that grace the hotel's suites, studios and rooms.

Inevitably, there's a sprinkling of in-house guests: they're the ones dining alone, having ordered from the plainer, cheaper bistro selection specially offered to provide business travellers homely cooking away from home.

However, Bisque also attracts a loyal band of locals who remember Morris from his Wellington restaurants of yore - Brasserie Bellazar and Fog City Grill. One such couple dines at Bisque every week without fail.

These are the takers for the à la carte menu, which begins with lobster bisque. For obvious reasons, this rich, tasty dish has been on Bisque's menu since day one, albeit in different permutations; currently the soup is garnished with saffron crème fraîche and a grilled prawn skewer.

As a flavour synergy, duck and crab might not immediately spring to mind, yet the combination is common in Chinese and Thai cuisines. At Bisque, crab tortellini sit comfortably alongside a mildly seasoned duck confit and over creamed Savoy cabbage with golden raisins and lentil jus.

Rather more familiar is lamb with parsnip purée, fresh peas, spinach and feta orecchiette. The lamb is marinated with star anise and cinnamon, and cooked perfectly pink in the middle. And, as with most dishes here, the presentation is precisely geometric - the way things used to be, before chefs began introducing free-form blobs of foam and spreading sauces with the back of a spoon.

The rum savarin (essentially a rum baba, only cooked in a ring mould) is totally old school - a yeast-risen brioche soaked with rum syrup. This classic cannot be improved upon, merely elaborated, as at Bisque, with fresh raspberries and espresso ice-cream.

A stone's throw from The Terrace, Bisque is central, yet has the air of a hideaway. It's a secret worth sharing.

✿ DAVID BURTON

BISQUE ON BOLTON & TINAKORI BISTRO, NICOLA EDMONDS