



London's junior Michelin dining trend

Britain's-once stuffy restaurants are opening up to young sophisticated diners. Restaurant critic Tristan Rutherford takes his 11-year-old nephew for a Michelin-starred tour of London's finest tables.



In the fine-dining rooms of Paris, children have always been welcome. In Rome and Barcelona, you're expected to bring the family. Not so in London. Until recently, Britain's Michelin-starred restaurants had a strict policy of no shorts and no sneakers. And definitely no kids.

Over the past few years all that has changed. London's cosmopolitan blend of European, Arabian, and American visitors prefer to dine *en famille*. Moreover, a generation of young foodies have become hooked on the Willy Wonka creations of global TV shows *MasterChef* and *Bake Off*. To prove the point, I dine with my 11-year-old nephew Myles at two of the capital's hottest high-end restaurants.

Hélène Darroze at The Connaught is arguably London's most sophisticated dining room. Guests are greeted by a welcome committee of finely attired waiters, then shown to an upholstered banquette overlooking Mayfair's most

elegant square. Staff routinely google guests prior to their arrival – and our visit is no exception. The maître d' Sandrine Pépin already knows Myles's name. The sommelier offers him a selection of pressed juices and me champagne. It's a family-friendly five-star welcome from the start.

Sandrine brings us not a starter – but two trays of 20 marble balls. Each sphere is embossed with the name of an ingredient: be it chocolate, pineapple, squid, or beef. "Choose your favourite ingredients, then Hélène's team will prepare a fantasy dinner just for you," explains Sandrine. Is this trick just for kids? "No, our adult diners also like to play and explore with food. Although, at Hélène Darroze, we host more children than ever before."

Myles and I select the £92 (US\$140)

five-course tasting menu. Each dish is a child's fantasy. Colourful ingredients come arranged like artwork on a fine china plate. We start with a foaming milk *escabeche* with green almonds hidden in the bottom – "surprising, subtle, and the freshest taste I've ever had," declares Myles. Then a scallop seared on a finger-like spread of baby carrots – "meaty, bizarre, and looks like a painting". Plus frogs' legs in a citrus zest – "like baby chicken, and I can't wait to tell my friends". Is my nephew enjoying the experience so far? "In a normal restaurant you talk about normal things, but here the interesting food invites you to talk more about food."

An 11-year-old dining guest like Myles offers further pearls of wisdom. We use the Connaught restrooms midway through the meal.





They are attended by a gentleman who turns on the taps, pours the soap, then offers a towel. "You can probably tell a lot about a restaurant by the toilet," says Myles. "If the bathroom is this clean, then just think how nice the kitchen is."

We're about to find out. After dinner, Myles asks for an invitation into H el ene Darroze's hallowed kitchen – the first time I've been behind the counter after dining in 50 Michelin-starred restaurants. But kids open doors, and ma tre d' Sandrine escorts us downstairs to meet head chef Alex Dilling, a regular on the UK edition of *MasterChef*. "I'm so glad that kids can enjoy this experience like adults," he tells us. "Like all our guests, Myles wants to explore the boundaries of taste."

In the hope of more child-friendly fine dining, Myles and I hit **Social**



Eating House the following lunchtime.

This single-Michelin-star restaurant in London's Soho district is run by 36-year-old owner-chef Paul Hood. We're shown to a leather booth by kindly maître d' Pia Krejac. A £25 (US\$38) set menu that includes raw swordfish with cucumber juice is set before us. First impressions? "It's much less expensive than the Connaught," says Myles. "That's because they have less workers, like a man to turn on the bathroom taps."

The age range is also different. "More friends in their thirties wearing T-shirts compared to couples in their fifties wearing ties." Does Myles feel more at home here? "Not at all. Both are probably the friendliest restaurants I've ever been in." The Social Eating House menu lists the provenance of every

ingredient – and the distance it's travelled. It starts us talking about food security and factory farming, an education in itself. We order smoked eel (from Lincolnshire, 228km away) then slow-cooked Herdwick lamb leg (from Cumbria, 476km away).

The food is as fabulous as it is informal. We're encouraged to order £6 (US\$10) sharing pots, like raw beef with egg yolk, at any time. We're also allowed to see the chefs working in the steamy kitchen through a window. "It's the first time I've tried lotus root and cep mushrooms," says Myles. "But this experience costs half the price of the cheapest Chelsea ticket, or FIFA16 on the Xbox." Maître d' Pia confirms that four family tables are reserved for next Saturday's service. My nephew Myles has already booked again. 🍷



Hélène Darroze, voted the world's best female chef in 2015

Hélène Darroze had the perfect post-university job: she was invited by superchef Alain Ducasse to work in his three-star Michelin restaurant Louis XV in Monaco – arguably the finest eatery in the Mediterranean. In 1999, Darroze opened her own eponymous restaurant in Paris. She won a first Michelin star in 2001, then a second in 2003. Her sister restaurant, Hélène Darroze at The Connaught in London, garnered two stars in 2011, just before she was awarded France's Légion d'honneur by then-French president Nicolas Sarkozy. Darroze was also the inspiration for the female cartoon character Colette in the animated foodie film *Ratatouille*.

Kids at The Connaught

Like many of London's five-star hotels, The Connaught sees the value in seasonal family stays, where all ages can bed down, dine, and play in Europe's largest city. This December kids are welcomed with a letter from Father Christmas, who will leave a gift-packed stocking in their room on December 25. Little ones will also receive a horse-drawn carriage ride around Mayfair, with a steaming hot chocolate to warm cold hands. At bedtime, they'll find milk and cookies (to leave for Santa) plus carrots (for Rudolph and friends). Two-star Michelin chef Hélène Darroze even has a bespoke kids' menu for Christmas Day.