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Gilgamesh

The Stables,
Chalk Farm Road,
Camden,
London,
NW1 8AH

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The ViewLondon Review



Review by [Lisa Ellwood](#)

18/03/2009

It's not just the chef at Gilgamesh who is well known, many of its regular diners are too. Sienna Miller, Girls Aloud, Mischa Barton and Paris Hilton (when they're in the capital) and even The Prodigy's Liam Howlett are all fans of the ostentatiously decorated restaurant. The kitchen is headed up by the ever-inventive Ian Pongelley whose strength lies in his willingness to experiment with combinations of tastes, textures and new ingredients, the latest of which is black rice.

The Venue

Lavish and decadent, at Gilgamesh you'll be hard pressed to find a single surface that hasn't been carved, inlaid, embroidered or coated in an obscenely expensive precious metal. The decor is inspired by the Babylonian era which let's face it was never renowned for its restraint and with the restaurant's location high above Stables Market, its lofty position and interior certainly scream unbridled luxury. However, having to wind your way through the bustle of the market stalls below the restaurant when you arrive, combined with the freight trains running past the windows day and night deal that all-important dose of [Camden](#) grit.

Love it or loathe it, the escalator that transports you up to the [restaurant](#) from Stables Market is the first of many memorable features. Where walls are necessary, they're made of glass so that wherever you look you can always see intricate carvings and

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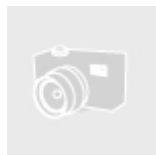
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glistening surfaces. This can be a little disorientating after a few cocktails however, so make sure that you get your bearings before proceeding to let your hair down. The bar lies to the left of the reception, with the vast restaurant on the right hand side combining intimate curved seating ideal for intimate dining with larger, carved dark wooden tables and heavily embroidered chairs that are popular with groups of friends.

The Atmosphere

The different levels and platforms within the restaurant combined with the numerous seating options, statues and the open kitchen at the far end of the room prevent the restaurant at Gilgamesh from feeling too vast and the low level lighting lends a sense of occasion to even the briefest, most informal of meals. In addition, the staff are so friendly and knowledgeable about all of the dishes and drinks on the menu that even the most jaded diner will find it hard not to be carried away by their enthusiasm and expertise. Follow their advice and you're highly likely to enjoy one of the best meals that you've ever eaten in the capital much to the envy of neighbouring tables.

The Food

Camden's dining scene has always been a delicious hotch-potch of blink-and-you'll-miss-them restaurants, serving up tasty authentic food at really reasonable prices. It's what makes the area so appealing to [Londoners](#) who love their food. However, what has been distinctly lacking is a glamorous restaurant that's not only passionate about its cuisine but keeps pushing the boundaries too which is why as soon as Gilgamesh opened it was so popular and still continues to be several years later. Most recently black rice has been added to the Pan-Asian menu which encourages the tapas ethos of ordering several dishes to share.

Both the tempura of warm Chilean sea bass nigiri (£8.50) and the risotto with crab, yuzu, truffle and bonito (£12) use black [rice](#) and whilst it is certainly the healthy option (it contains more nutrients than both white and brown rice, has been scientifically proven to lower cholesterol, is high in the antioxidant anthocyanin and doesn't contain the high levels of bran that are found in brown rice making it suitable for those on a low carb diet) it is also popular for its sweet, nutty flavour. Both dishes are outstanding – the sea bass nigiri has a good consistency and the rice isn't too packed together whilst the sea bass tempura sitting on top of the rice parcel has a light batter that's crispy and not too oily without being at all dry. As for the risotto, it's as visually arresting as it tastes. Served in a Martini glass, the black rice adds depth and sweetness to the creamy dish which really enhances the richness of the truffle and the flakes of crab.

Gilgamesh is famed for many of its dishes, not least Mr Chang's roll (£10.50) and it's not hard to understand why as it fuses textures, flavours and influences perfectly from the tender prawn at the centre and the crisp iceberg lettuce surrounding it to

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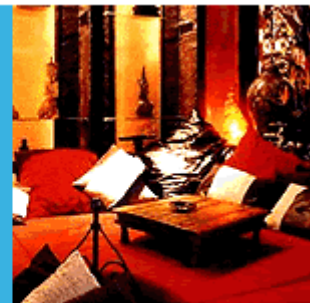


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the rice drizzled with the restaurant's equivalent of Thousand Island dressing. The only drawback is that the pieces are so big you won't be able to eat them in one bite so make sure that you're handy with chopsticks before you order. The duck and watermelon salad with cashew nuts (£11) is generously sized. The mahogany brown, richly coloured duck is tender and crispy and works well in contrast to the bright pink, cool sponginess of the watermelon and the satisfying crunch of the cashews. However, on every menu there's always a dish that's so delicious you think of it wistfully whenever someone talks about London restaurants and, at Gilgamesh, that dish is the crispy squid (£7) which is served in a roll of paper like a traditional chip cone from a takeaway. Lightly sprinkled in vinegar the sharp acid works well with the light batter encasing the succulent pieces of squid (there's nothing chewy about this seafood) and is the ultimate upmarket, gourmet version of a dish from the chippie for anyone fancying a [fish](#) and chip fix.

Refreshingly for a Pan-Asian restaurant, the desserts at Gilgamesh are as outstanding as the rest of the menu. The light sponge of the chocolate fondant (£7) falls apart to reveal piping hot chocolate sauce which is the ideal partner to the accompanying scoop of ice cream. The green tea brulee (£6) is topped with a crunchy caramelised layer beneath which the cream is delicately flavoured with light notes of green tea. Whilst all of the desserts are exceptional albeit it a bit on the small side, if you must choose only one dessert make it the green tea banana cake (£7) that comes warm with a scoop of ice cream on the side. The rich ripe banana flavour is prevented from being too sickly with the addition of the green tea and the gooey yet light sponge is so good that you'll slow down every spoonful just so that you can savour it a little bit longer.

The Drink

The separate bar area with its curved back to back seating is a must for a pre or post dinner drink and in surroundings this extravagant it's natural to opt for the cocktails not least because the names are so evocative. Unfortunately, they are exceedingly expensive and whilst they are of a decent standard, they don't justify this kind of pricing in Camden. Make sure that you try the large bowl of complimentary prawn crackers that are served with your cocktails as they are easily some of the best you'll find around Camden. The Anu cocktail (named after the sky god in Babylonian mythology) is priced at £9.50 and the ingredients are slightly incongruous as the addition of cucumber to the blend of Absolute Peach, Bombay Sapphire gin and peach puree leaves a slightly antiseptic aftertaste following the otherwise warm ripeness of the peach flavours. The Shamash (named after the sun god worshipped in Babylonian times) is better although at £10.50 you are still paying Mayfair prices. Served in a Champagne flute it combines Bombay Sapphire gin, Violett and lychee with a splash of Champagne and is a fragrant alternative to a standard long gin drink.

The wine list on the other hand is excellent and more

realistically priced with red wine starting at £6.50 a glass for the 2004 Chilean Merlot Reserva although it's worth stretching to £9 for a glass of the full bodied, spicy 2005 Malbec Reserva hailing from Argentina. Whites again start at £6.50 for a glass of Chilean Sauvignon Blanc and for just a pound more you can enjoy a glass of French Chablis. The sake list is just as strong. Bottles of standard sake start at £15 for 300ml and peak at £80 for a 500ml bottle of Daiginjo tenpyo. As for the fine sake selection, it goes up to £255 for a 300ml bottle of 1985 Kidoizumi.

The Last Word

Any restaurant charging Primrose Hill prices in Camden needs to deliver not only stunning surroundings but also spectacular cuisine and Gilgamesh certainly succeeds. Imaginative ingredients, innovative dishes and painstaking presentation add up to a truly memorable meal. Skip the cocktails and get stuck in.

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