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Restaurant Reviews

March 2009

Gilgamesh

Gilgamesh - Camden Stables Market - Chalk Farm Road - London NW1 Tel: 020 7482 5757
www.gilgameshbar.com

Recession what recession? Those in work are having it large, with ever decreasing mortgage repayments giving them more cash to splash. Maybe that's why here in Gilgamesh on a Wednesday night the bar is pretty full and the restaurant is too. In the private dining room, a hundred and fifty people are tucking into chef Ian Pengelley's Pan Asian food and the man himself can be seen in his open kitchen toiling away happily.

Of course they said it wouldn't last, this massive ornate, OTT madcap palace when it first opened. They were wrong, obviously. It's still a great venue to arrive at, with the opening theatre of a single, supermodel-thin, escalator that rises up as if on a fast track to the pearly gates as celestial lights sense your presence and illuminate your ascent. At the top it's dark and moody with the smell of incense hanging in the air and a whiff of dry ice drifting about. In the bar comfy booths beg to receive your bottom and those of us of a certain age fumble for our reading glasses to make out the drinks menu.



A cocktail or two later and the walkie-talkie'd waitress is taking us into the main room where a vaulted ceiling soars over massed diners, a roof that can and does open wide in the summer. It's all very large and showy and the varying levels make it stagey too, so that you feel like you're somewhere special and having a bit of a big night whatever night of the week it happens to be. You can talk comfortably too, as despite the crowds there is a sense of privacy from the curved seating that folds you in towards your table and, as you try to find the reading glasses you stupidly put away earlier, you relax.

Ian Pengelley's menu has been honed over the time he's been at the controls here and his crispy squid has, if anything got even better – salty, spiky with fresh chilli and, yes, beautifully crispy too. New dishes on the menu include Tempura of Warm Chilean Sea Bass Nigiri which once again comes without a trace of grease, or a single soft spot, and is bound by seaweed to a perfect block of black rice so accurately made you could use a set square on its edges. The black rice, which is apparently proven to lower cholesterol, appears again in a tall glass of risotto with King Crab, Yuzu, Truffle and Bonito and demonstrates how it can morph to become superbly creamy. The dim sum, some of chicken and some of scallops, are tightly made by obvious experts, but why do they come in threes? It only makes it hard to share and surely twos or four would be better?

In a cloud of dry ice so thick you expect it part to reveal Spinal Tap, a selection of sashimi arrive. The

presentation, once the clouds thin, is impeccable and the fish is as perfectly fresh as of course it needs to be. Strips of pickled ginger are tangled alongside and a good wasabi paste has plenty of bite but doesn't make you do the nose trick like the fluorescent stuff out of a tube so often does.

And so to dessert, not normally a Pan Asian strongpoint, but here really rather impressive. The chocolate fondant with ice cream is as good as any Modern European restaurant would roll out and green tea banana cake is rich without being cloying. Then it's back to the bar for more cocktails before taking the rather more prosaic stairs down to ground level.

A pleasure palace that Kubla Khan might have happily bought into off-plan, Gilgamesh works well. The food is excellent, the 'vibe' attractive. Well worth a visit, recession or no recession.

Nick Harman

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