



FRESH ACT

There's a new chef in Halo's kitchen at The Morrison. DOMINI KEMP checks in

She was always a smart hotel (Douglas Wallace and John Rocha designed) but The Morrison's proximity to the Liffey has meant that she never got too full of herself. Thanks to a recent and very gradual renovation, there's a buzz about the hotel at the moment. So thinking I'd be ahead of the posse, I traipsed down there to see what newly appointed chef Richie Wilson (formerly of Thornton's and The Tannery) had to offer.

If there is going to be an award for charming service this year, I think it must go to the Halo Restaurant staff, fronted by manager Eric Handts. Move over Olivier (AKA Mr Dax), there's a new Frenchman in town. The former manager of Gazza Rhodes' eatery, Rhodes WI in London, is handsome, confident, charming and leads his team with a certain aplomb. Incredibly courteous Gallic restaurant staff are such a rarity these days, they should be given endangered species protection.

Good breads were welcomed and I settled on the seared scallops with shallot purée, smoked bacon and pea foam (€12) to start, while my guest went for the honey and pistachio-glazed widgeon with parsnip purée and sloe gin sauce (€11). Now, I'd never heard of widgeon and genuinely thought it was a typo, but Monsieur Handts assured us it was indeed a gamey bird. In fact, according to my trusty *Oxford Companion to Food*, widgeons are considered to be "gregarious birds, lacking in intelligence and therefore an easy prey for wildfowlers".

My scallops were good although the chef is fond of those ever-so *passé* compartmentalised plates, which are just a little too Kajagoogoo for my liking. The flavours

were perfect, however. The dumb, gregarious bit of wildlife was tasty, perhaps a little too gamey for my palate, but disappeared quickly despite containing too many unnecessary elements.

For our mains, my companion had Irish-reared Hereford sirloin of beef with sautéed forest mushrooms, seared foie gras and a tarragon mousse (€25). Usually a chef partners up foie gras with fillet rather than sirloin because fillets are leaner, tend to lack flavour and often need help in the flavouring department. Sirloins can support simpler garnishes and so with this dish, I felt that the garnishes were overkill despite the fact that overall it went down well.

My loin of venison with caramelised orange segments, carrot cones, star anise and cinnamon *jus* was hit and miss. The venison was beautifully cooked but the garnish did little to bring out its best qualities. Venison has a delicate gamey flavour which comes from dark meat that is very lean and, like the fillet of beef, also needs a little help in the accessories department and a rich, even creamy, garnish. Although I love salty and sweet flavours, the *jus* and the orange segments overpowered the dish and the carrot cones seemed to me an exercise in fancy knifemanship.

The chef can clearly cook, but needs to re-think some of the garnishes. Their pricing is very fair considering the surroundings

and the pool of talented people at work both front and back of house and don't get me wrong: the food is good, I just think they are on a positive wave and are keen to make things better and better, and so they should keep at it. It is great to see such enthusiasm, but some of the effort in the kitchen is misplaced. Less focus on "clever" combinations and such precise presentation would match the unobtrusive and unstuffy service. I don't think the chef is cooking dishes he likes to eat, but rather dishes he thinks his customers will like.

Dessert offered fun, crowd-pleasing surprises. Our "coffee break" was a Jivara chocolate and vanilla *feuilletine* which was almost like a frozen *parfait* with sheets of super-thin crisp biscuit in between, accompanied by a little cappuccino cup of soft, gooey coffee-flavoured creamy caramel (€9.50). The "hot chocolate" being eaten at the next table looked delicious and was a combo of "rich dark and white hot chocolate with chilli flakes, and misshaped marshmallows".

I would definitely go back to Halo and have recommended it several times. Not only is it glam, but romantic too, and the food is 90 per cent there. Plus, the sommelier is working hard on an exciting new wine list. The kitchen just needs to concentrate on getting the textures and flavours to work *together*. It can still remain fancy and fine, but some confidence in the "less is more" approach to garnishes will serve customers better and ensure the dishes taste as well as they should. ■

Halo Restaurant, at The Morrison, Ormond Quay, Dublin 1. 01 887 2421

HOTEL HAVENS

■ **THE FOUR SEASONS** It's hard to imagine ever being disappointed when you step inside the doors of The Four Seasons. The place oozes with professional charm. You can eat in the fancy Seasons restaurant or "slum it" (like I do) in the Café. The service is always impeccable and Terry White's team of chefs serves up everything from top-class burgers to banquets for 500; Simmons Court Road, Dublin 4, 01 665 4000.

■ **THE MERRION** If it's exquisitely dressed comfort food you're after, The Cellar Restaurant won't let you down. Great ingredients, perfectly prepared; Upper Merrion Street, Dublin 2, 01 603 0600.

■ **THE DYLAN** Superb, modern cooking can be found at Still, the Dylan's white, billowing oasis of calm. Interesting game, offal and veggie options sit alongside beef fillet and fishy favourites. Presentation is equally appetising; Eastmoreland Place, Dublin 4, 01 660 3000.

