

Wellington

THE WHITE HOUSE RESTAURANT

★★★★★

Upstairs, 232 Oriental Parade, Oriental Bay, ph: 04-385 8555, whr.co.nz

Lunch Wed-Sun, dinner 7 days
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Having spent his entire career in haute cuisine, Paul Hoather has a well-developed sense of showmanship.

At Wellington's Plimmer House in the 80s he produced yin-yang shaped fish mousselines and in the 90s, before molecular gastronomy had even been heard of, he was carving potatoes into trompe l'oeil "marrow bones".

As the recipient of many past accolades he's done what it takes to stay at the top of his game (including a dining tour of duty around Europe's top restaurants) and today, more than ever, he's a conjuror of witty visual conceits.

These are best seen in The White House Restaurant's 10-course *dégustation* menu, which opens with a single, perfect radish, grown in the restaurant's rooftop garden then "transplanted" to a terracotta garden pot of walnut and pumpernickel "soil" over honeyed goat's cheese.

With Heston's mock turtle soup you enjoy a joke at your own expense, as you eat part of your \$140 *dégustation* bill in the form of a homemade stock cube wrapped in gold leaf, which disintegrates into a thousand shiny particles as the waiter pours over hot chicken consommé. Very pretty, and also pretty tasty.

Later, a mandarin and raspberry vincotto granita arrives sizzling beneath billowing clouds of dry ice, like a Chinese restaurant's hot iron platter in reverse.

Underlying such high jinks, however, are seriously cutting-edge combinations of flavours and contrasts in texture, as in the seared scallops, red pepper harissa, smoked fish purée, fennel, date and orange salad.

"Try to fit a little of every component on to each forkful," was the sage advice from waiter Peter Watson, who forms part of the evening's entertainment.

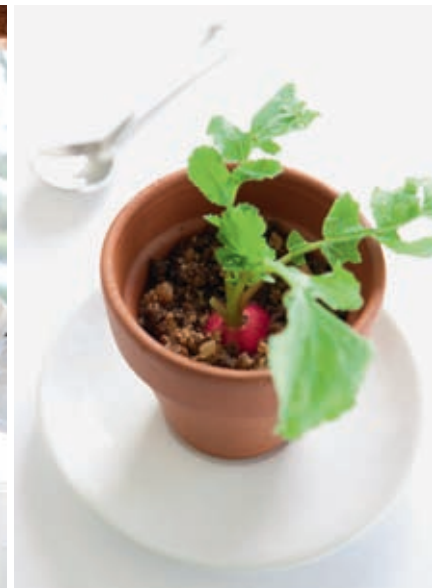
Challenged by the indecisive folk at the next table to make their choices for them from the à la carte menu, Peter did so and then added:

"Everything's my fault. If it turns out badly I'm to blame, whereas if you like it then you chose well."

Along with the new waitstaff, there has been an overhaul of the dining room. More a makeover than a total shake-over, there is new carpet, posh new chair upholstery and a fresh coat of metallic paint over the beautiful Robert Adam-style plaster ceiling.

Having secured your window table

The White House Restaurant
Below left: chef Paul Hoather
Below right: a "potted" radish
opens the 10-course *dégustation*



overlooking Wellington Harbour, arrive early enough to watch the water turn from aqua to indigo as the city lights up and creates shimmering reflections. The playlist of smoochy jazz classics further adds to the romance.

"The thing I like about this deg menu is that for once the portions are big enough to get a proper taste of everything," I declared after the sous-vide breast and leg of duck, in which the velvety kumara mash and lines of hoisin sauce and mandarin purée all

served functions beyond mere decoration.

I must admit, however, that after the third meat course I was beginning to feel a mite replete.

Still, that didn't stop me pouncing upon the cheese course – a meltingly ripe slice of Over The Moon Triple Cream Brie, topped with a wedge of blushing pear (poached in spiced raspberry juice). And who could resist a molten chocolate pudding when the chocolate is Valrhona?

✳ DAVID BURTON