

A DELICIOUS RETURN

Michelin-starred Matt Lambert is back in Auckland with a restaurant that celebrates New Zealand’s best-loved foods in surprising new ways, writes



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How do you elevate the Kiwi classic of fish and chips? Apparently, by deconstructing battered fish into a thumb-sized oblong of crispy beer batter, topped with a slice of cured tarakihi and pickled onion, served on a square of that day’s newspaper.

Ponsonby’s new restaurant, Return, has taken up residence on the site of the former Ponsonby Road Bistro, which briefly became GiGi Ponsonby for less than a year until the restaurant sold up to Michelinstarred chef Matt Lambert and his wife Barbara.

The couple used to head New York restaurant The Musket Room, which received Michelin star status, and they have now opened Return, a refined and relaxed dining experience.

This cosy restaurant, with a discreet entrance that shields diners from prying Ponsonby Rd wanderers, takes many humble New Zealand icons and turns them into elevated and unique dishes that you’ll want to tell all your friends about.

Guests can either dine a la carte or pick from a sixcourse “Short Story” tasting menu or the 10-course “Long Story”. But don’t call it a degustation – despite its highprofile chef, Return is not interested in pretentiousness or exclusivity; rather, it’s a place to gather, relax and enjoy excellent food in a comfortable setting, with Matt at the helm of the kitchen and Barbara on the floor helping every guest feel part of the Return family.

We start with a series of snacks alongside our cocktails, including the aforementioned fish and chips, a ‘steak and chips’ featuring a tender beef tartare wrapped in crispy strands of fried potato with a cheese cream on top, chicken nuggets – gently fried chicken topped with honey mustard and caviar – and mushrooms on sourdough, featuring a light whipped mushroom mousse on a sourdough cracker. Just from the snacks alone, the textures in my mouth journeyed from cloud-like to crispy and everywhere in between.

Our entrees included a beautifully presented kingfish crudo, with each piece of fish nestled into slices of fennel crafted into a rosebud, served with mascarpone and dill oil; and Cambridge duck with sourdough cream, lightly pickled onions and fresh blackberries. The duck and berries turned out to be a marriage made in culinary heaven, providing a sweet berry pop alongside the tender meat.

My market fish main was hāpuku (groper), served on a buttery prawn base with cabbage and pomegranate that I felt slightly possessive of and was reluctant to share with my partner, while he found himself in a flavour nirvana with his main of lean wild venison, artichoke and coriander puree.

The intrigue continued over dessert – a pavlova meringue cylinder with passionfruit and lemon curd, described by my partner as “the pavlova I want every Christmas”. I enjoyed an apple and lemongrass tart, served with matcha and yoghurt, offering a balance of delicate flavours, textures and punch.

Matt delivered a selection of petit fours to conclude our dining experience, featuring his take on a Crunchie bar with white-chocolate-coated honeycomb, a soft nougat with pistachio, a ginger cube, chocolate praline and the surprising item that actually makes total sense once you think about it – a Marmite caramel, which tasted just like a soft salted caramel.

I’m intrigued to find out what other Kiwi food items can be elevated at Return in future. I’m sure the pavlova will remain a permanent spot on the menu, alongside the fish and chips – and I have no doubt its evolving menu will see many diners ‘return’ for a taste of home.



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