



CULINARY ENCOUNTERS OF THE MODERN KIND

Encounters with modern gastronomy are on the rise in Bangkok in an obvious nod to the increasingly sophisticated palates in the city, writes Neetinder Dhillon.

Having lived in this city for close on fifteen years I have borne witness to its changing food culture. A change that has made Thais more adventurous, more open to exploring new taste horizons. Resulting in an explosion of restaurants of many hues.

And while the food culture has still a long way to go before it can be likened to the over all sophistication of say Hong Kong, Tokyo or even Singapore it certainly is on the right track. Who would have imagined all those years ago I would be eating green curry mousse or a *mieng kham* transformed into a cornetto minus the all important leaf in Bangkok! What also surprised me was the Thai diners obviously relishing everything the chef at Sra Bua sent their way. This was not traditional Thai cuisine, but no one was complaining.

Fifteen years ago your dining choices in Bangkok were Thai, Chinese and Italian with an occasional French braving it out. Of course there were the pubs if nothing else appealed. Which is why it is such a delight now to see restaurants and hotels attempt-

ing things that a few years ago would have bombed with barely a whimper. Plus, Michelin star chefs have finally discovered Bangkok and are now regularly stopping by introducing diners to a whole new way of exploring food.

Bangkok is getting there, it is acquiring a sophisticated edge. And I base this statement on not just the visiting Michelin star chefs or the slew of creative local chefs but also on a recent dinner at the Plaza Athénée. It was a dine around that took us on a tour of the hotel's kitchens, freezer, restaurants and even the pavement edging Wireless Road. The surprising part was not the dine-around per se, but the food plated.

Behind the food were the creative powers of chefs Daniel Bucher and Axel Herz. Orchestrating the show were the hotel's executive chef Martin Faist and Benjawan Wisootsat, managing director of fin (wine importer). The wine for the evening also came from the fin cellars.

Chefs Daniel Bucher and Axel Herz, both award-winning chefs from Le Meridien Hamburg have taken the

molecular road: Axel Herz is the molecular mixologist and Daniel Bucher the molecular chef. The evening obviously brought molecular gastronomy sharply into focus with spherifications, foams and airs. Bucher described it as nothing more than 'basic food science combined with an avant-garde culinary approach'. What it is, is all about putting the fun back into the food while playing with textures and flavours. States Bucher, "I am trying to create and develop ideas through food. Ideas that are able to surprise, to amaze or even to make you laugh."

Alex Herz began the evening with especially created molecular cocktails at the hotel's Glaz Bar. Then it was time for the 'progressive dinner' which began in the gardens adjoining the pool. Setting the mood was a crisp rosé 2008 Meersburger Bengel Spatburgunder Weissherbst QbA,



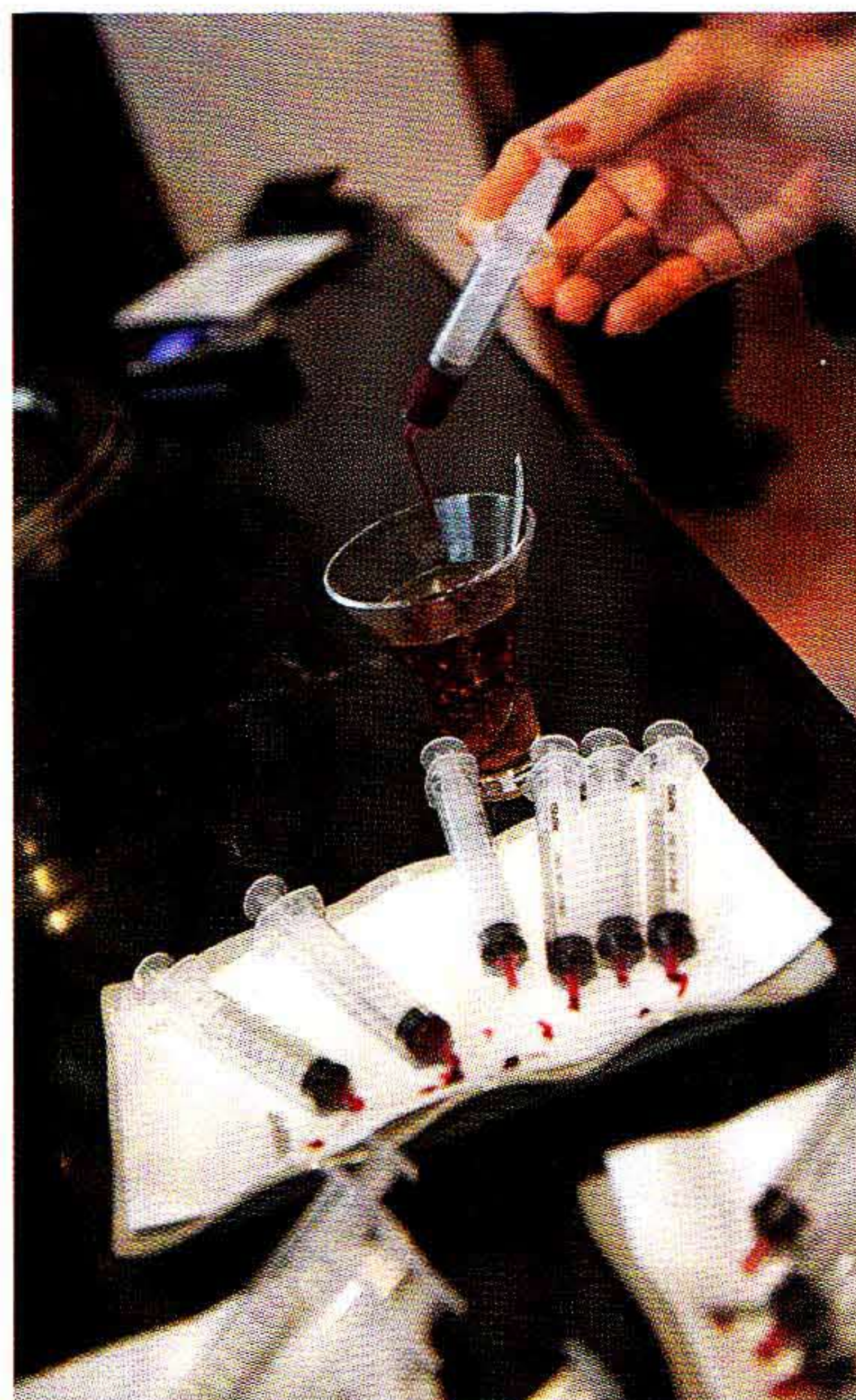
Baden. On the table was a large platter with the first offering: an edible garden. Tiny salad leaf shrubs, orange pebbles and rocks, mushrooms, cheese boulders, baby carrots, tiny red radish... all held together with edible soil that ranged from dark brown (caramelised onions) to a gritty lighter sand and of course truffles. A startling presentation, that was as much installation art as food. The joy was in discovering what each element was and realising that while it all looked like a game it was real food. Every aspect on the plate owed itself to a molecular mindset.

The second course saw us trooping down to the squash court for oxtail consommé served in a glass tumbler. To add another dimension to the delicate consommé was either a syringe full of beetroot reduction (red blood) or celery infusion (white). On contact with the hot soup the reductions formed into tiny pearls adding body to the soup and elevating the taste as they burst in your mouth. Served along with it was shrimp bon-bon in lobster foil with a wrapper made of salmon reduction; and a sesame covered tuna praline flavoured with Japanese lemon pepper, an ingredient which leaves the tongue tingling.

The chefs were certainly showing us that fine dining can be a whole lot of fun, and while appealing to the child in you they made sure that the food was of the highest standards. To wash these various flavours down we had 2009 Gaba do XIL Godello from Valdeorras, Spain: a light straw with immense minerality and citrus notes plus a clean, long finish.

We were next herded into one of the hotel kitchens to dine on Poached Trout with lavender oil and smoked juniper berries. A perfectly poached trout sat on a disc of squid ink jelly, topped with orange salmon roe and a curl of crisp fish skin. A lavender sprig added a dash of colour. It was interesting watching the chefs put the dish together and add that last flourish: smoking it with juniper berries. An upturned glass served as the cloche to trap the smoke. On the tongue the dish came together like a symphony: the delicate nuttiness of the trout, the spike of salt from the roe, the dark briny punch of the jelly (the umami factor here, for sure) and the lingering pine-y/resinous flavour of the juniper berry... for some reason the dish conjured up the Norwegian fjords in my mind's eye. A dish like this needs a special wine for not only does it have to work with the flavours but also the image created. fin served a perfect one: velvety full-bodied 2005 M Spatburgunder Pinot Noir, Schneider, Pfalz, Germany.

A masterstroke like the trout means the expectations from the next course are seriously high and on the face of it the next one – when compared to the trout – is pedestrian: a mushroom risotto. So how do they up the ante? By moving the dining venue to the pavement outside the hotel bordering Wireless Road and replacing arborio with barley. A food cart served as the chef's work table as he ladled out a barley risotto that was far from pedestrian. The barley was al dente, the perfect setting for the strong shiitake mushroom. A crumbed egg yolk reposed on top. My only



problem was with the yolk; had it been lightly poached the liquid goodness would have added another dimension to the risotto. But it was cooked through and dry adding a heaviness the risotto could have done without. Luckily it could be easily pushed aside. Despite that, the risotto struck a chord. A hearty dish complemented perfectly by Fred Loimer's 2008 Fred Zweigelt from Austria. This part of the progressive dinner fell in the 'pop-up' category. Now imagine if the entire dinner had been served here!

Next we headed to the kitchen freezer for the chocolate-caramel experience: One frozen the other crumbed and flash fried. Both inspired by the German dumpling. Delightful ice carvings of dolphins turn this utilitarian space into a wonderland of flavours.

The evening ended at the hotel's presidential suite. A giant caviar tin on ice became the focus of our attention: espresso caviar to be eaten on toasted brioche with a dollop of sweetened vanilla whipped cream. A fantastic play on a traditional Italian dessert: affogato. Taking on the coffee was 2008 MR Mountain Wine from Telmo Rodriguez, Spain. A hundred percent moscatel, its honeyed citrus profile and tropical fruit aromas completed the picture.

The finale of the evening had us all trooping into the suite bathroom! To taste the bathroom amenities – tooth-

paste, shampoo, conditioner, foam cleanser, lotion, soap, sea sponges, etc all edible. For the first time in my life I found myself taking the amenities from a hotel home. This was pure fun. Said Giuseppe Fornillo, the hotel's executive assistant manager, "We want to offer Bangkok something new and modern, in terms of food, cooking techniques, outstanding wines and unique dining experiences. We have the techniques, the venues and the expertise to create a special evening for private parties or even corporate functions."

The only problem I had with the evening was that it was also labelled a 'pop-up restaurant' experience, in a nod to the craze that swept Britain in the 2000s, enslaved New York and has been doing the rounds of Europe ever since. Pop-up by definition is a temporary restaurant installation – sometimes just for a night – in unexpected places like art galleries, stadiums, markets, private homes, even factories. The idea being to focus the attention on the food while injecting the evening with a healthy dose of fun. And though the locations at Plaza Athénée were diverse and amusing, it was definitely more a dine around. Now if the entire dinner had been served on the pavement outside... that could have been a true 'pop-up'. As it stands I am still waiting for a proper pop-up experience in Bangkok. ■