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TRADITION WITH A TWEAK

PULLING up in front of a stucco townhouse hotel in London is no guarantee of luxury, as anyone who has had a horror stay in Pimlico, Bayswater and Earls Court, knows. Hotel Xenia, in South Kensington, delivers the required upmarket standard with Tom Kirk chandeliers, soaring Regency-era ceilings and hand-woven cashmere blankets. It's also close to Harrods, Harvey Nicks and the V&A, and is a great base for exploring the British capital's ever-changing dining scene. Great international staff, a top bar and first-rate English breakfasts are added lures for anyone on a foodie tour of the British capital.

Tradition with a tweak can often be more pleasurable than discovering something new. A thought that's difficult to brush aside when you are sitting amidst the gilded mirrors and riotous ceiling frescoes of the Oscar Wilde room in the Hotel Cafe Royal. Sipping on a Veuve Clicquot cocktail, the London Royal Tea elevates the pukka ritual of afternoon tea to new heights. There's an extensive tea menu, of course, but what really sets the experience apart is the gorgeously-attired MC, who interrupts the scoffing of Battenberg cake and raspberry mousse topped with gold leaf with hourly recitals of quotes and anecdotes from the scandalous writer's life.

Four cocktails whipped up by master mixologist, Ryan Chetiyawardana, winner of the 2015 World's Best Bartender title, cue in with the 70s-inspired Wyld Tea at the Mondrian hotel on Southbank. The decade that style forgot had a lot of it, apparently, if the baked alaskas, rose blanchmanges and Tom Dixon-designed Dandelyan Bar are any indication. A highlight of any visit is the Fluff & Fold Royale - a botanical blend of prosecco, lime, basil, orange bitters and cacao liqueur.

The alcoholic component that raises most eyebrows at one of London's new-generation afternoon tea ceremonies is sparkling sake, served with green tea and chocolate savarin at Ichi Sushi & Sashimi restaurant in the Park Plaza Westminster Bridge hotel. Seafood takes the place of scones and the chefs serve up 14 types of sushi and five extremely sweet Japanese desserts to satisfy sweet-tooth cravings. Ask for one of the tables with a view of Big Ben.

Two spirit-laden drinks set the scene at the Scandal Water afternoon tea served at the Edition London hotel in Berners St. Sitting in the oak-paneled Punch Room bar, it's easy to conjure up images of Georgian-era

ladies and gentlemen as you enjoy the Milk Punch - a traditional concoction of cognac, rum, apple brandy, tea and clarified milk. Need an extra kick? Then opt for the mezcal-based cocktail livened up with chamomile soda, lemon sorbet and vermentino Italian white wine, accompanied with shortbread made with Lincolnshire Poacher artisan cheese. Be sure to sample the Sencha green tea.

London's premier hotels have been awarded a galaxy of Michelin stars. If you have always lusted after a meal at the three-star Epicure restaurant at Le Bristol in Paris, the next best thing can be found at the Celeste restaurant in the Lanesborough Hotel near Hyde Park Corner. The chef, Florian Favario, learned his craft at the elbow of Eric Frechon, the executive chef of Epicure, and was awarded his first Michelin star last October. His speciality is fish delicately but decisively flavoured, so place close attention to the daily specials.

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If modern British is more to your liking, the Ritz restaurant in the fabled hotel of the same name, helmed by executive chef John Williams, also received a Michelin star in October. The setting couldn't be better - frescoed ceilings, huge windows and neo-classical statuary - to tuck into British venison, red cabbage, celeriac and blackcurrant.

If two Michelin stars exert a siren's call, save up your moolah for Helene Darroze's double-starred eatery in the venerable Connaught Hotel. Widely acknowledged as the best female chef in the world, Ms Darroze keeps regulars guessing with her constantly changing menus. I still dream of the Scottish lobster with lobster "crumble" and curry emulsion.

Ditto the signature dish at Heston Blumenthal's two-

star shrine - simply called Dinner - in the Mandarin Oriental hotel in Kensington. Consider: chicken liver parfait wrapped in mandarin jelly to resemble a mandarin. Billed as a celebration of 600 years of British cooking, each dish at Dinner is tagged by the year of its invention.

But London's most intimate Michelin-starred hotel restaurant is Seven Park Place in the St James Hotel & Club. There are only nine tables and the menu walks the line between French and British contemporary. The sommelier is top notch and expertly advises which wines match best with chef William Drabble's flights of fantasy, many featuring game in season.

Texture restaurant in Portman St has possessed a Michelin star since 2010. Head chef Aggi (Agnar) Sverrisson is Icelandic, but has worked for over 18 years in the UK with the likes of Raymond Blanc at Le Manoir aux Quat' Saisons and Mosimann's. He describes his food as "modern European with Scandinavian influences". We're talking Anjou quail with bacon popcorn and white chocolate mousse and sorbet with dill and cucumber. For about \$480, including wines, the most extraordinary experiences are the Sense-action dinners in the private dining room. The lighting mimics the Aurora Borealis and sounds of the Icelandic countryside babble in the background as you hoe into dishes such as reindeer with chocolate and red cabbage.

Organic Italian is the drawcard at Fucina, Stefano Stecca's (Toto's) new Marylebone restaurant. The pasta, made from stone-ground wholemeal flour, is rolled to order and you won't taste juicier, more tender meat than the suckling pig, lamb and boar cooked in the restaurant's wood-fired oven. The stunning decor is worth a visit alone.

Will Burrett and Annabel Partridge, honed their skills at Spring at Somerset House with Skye Gyngell. The duo has opened The Pear Tree Cafe next to Battersea Park's Boating Lake. A go-to for those who want to experience nature in central London, the serene venue is open for breakfast, weekend brunch and dinner. The health-oriented menu is centred on offerings such as charred squid with preserved lemons, purple sprouting broccoli, almonds and chilli oil and Dorset white crab with celeriac, walnuts and nasturtium. Grass-fed outdoor-reared meat, artisan cheeses and sustainable fish only.