

Food & Drink Eating Out

A long wait for

Restaurant Reviews

York & Albany ★★★☆☆

So I finally manage to get a table at York & Albany. I've been calling the Ramsay stable's central reservations centre (an outfit I can't help but imagine looking like the nightmarish workers' co-ops in Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*) for weeks and each time a different charming accent says, basically, no chance.

It's fair to say this Camden newcomer is a roaring success. As I've said before, I'm desperate to love a Ramsay place – although this one, like Murano, is firmly stamped with the Angela Hartnett imprimatur – and have been hoping Y&A might be The One. Pulling up outside this handsome Nash building looking on to Regent's Park, I'm feeling a little like a teenager about to have a personal moment with Zac Efron.

And wow, does it look good. Whatever anyone might say about Ramsay and his cohorts, major kudos for saving this building, a previously mouldering Regency gem. Designer Russell Sage – The Goring, South Ken's Papillon – has delivered an urbane stunner bursting with luxury materials: grey velvet, acres of silk, a lovely, lengthy zinc bar, big blousy lampshades that wittily reference Camden bedsit paper globes but actually probably cost squillions in Heals. All gorgeously trad-contemporary. I guess the brief went something like: 'Regency stuff, OK, yesss, but we're not f***ing fusty, yessss? Yesss????'

We're led into the most attractive of three dining rooms, sharing the ground floor with the good-looking bar. But we're literally pressed against the window and the chilliness of the glass means one side of me goes numb. The place is heaving with a curious mixture of trade: tables of elderly, intellectual types next to pierced, scowling chaps. Ah, Camden. Most anomalous in these surroundings are the Big Sweary groupies: you can tell them by their sprayed, frosted tresses and tight leopard-print tops.

It's so busy that staff are frazzled. We sit for ages, shivering, without menus. People are being given Kilner jars of what looks like chicken



Bursting with luxury: Camden's York & Albany is a design dream but the food wouldn't tempt us back

parfait. I love chicken parfait but it's not on the menu. Turns out it's a freebie we don't get. We also don't get a jokey paper bag of popcorn with our coffees and are overcharged on our bill (a cheese course, which is part of the lunch menu, appears for an extra £8.50). There's nothing like being made to feel properly small.

It's not like the food is complicated or difficult. Hartnett's trademark Italianate Brit is being translated by head chef Colin Buchan (formerly of Ramsay's short-lived Glasgow outpost, Amaryliss) into dishes where simplicity is a Good Thing. Some dishes are merely assemblies of excellent ingredients, such as beetroot, pumpkin and red chard salad with pancetta vinaigrette, or evolved fry-ups such as fried duck's egg with field mushrooms, Jerusalem artichoke and Parmesan.

A starter of rabbit leg pappardelle explains why the set lunch appears, at £18 for three courses, to be such good value: it's minuscule. It's also tepid and slightly watery. The à la carte option is better: a pumpkin and aged Gorgonzola risotto, which I prefer –

more velvety, more al dente – to its namesake over at Murano.

A fat, pearly slab of first-class halibut arrives in an earthenware dish with milky white beans and the muscular presence of chorizo: truly terrific. As is pork cheeks and belly – so slow-braised they melt like fondant – with date and apple compote and an indecently rich slick of creamed white polenta. This, too, is teeny but so heady that a little is more than enough. The double-charged cheeses are adequate: Pecorino, chalky goat, unremarkable Brie and Taleggio, with a handful of water biscuits.

'It's really good for Camden,' I've been told. Is that a compliment? It's certainly glamorous. But the food is better at unassuming Market down the road. Sure, I'd go back, especially after stocking up on vintage leather, ethnic jewellery and 8in platforms, for a cocktail at the lovely bar. But cross town? I don't think so. But then I'd probably feel the same about Zac Efron.

Marina O'Loughlin

A meal for two with wine, water and service costs about £100 (Christmas set lunch is £25 a head).