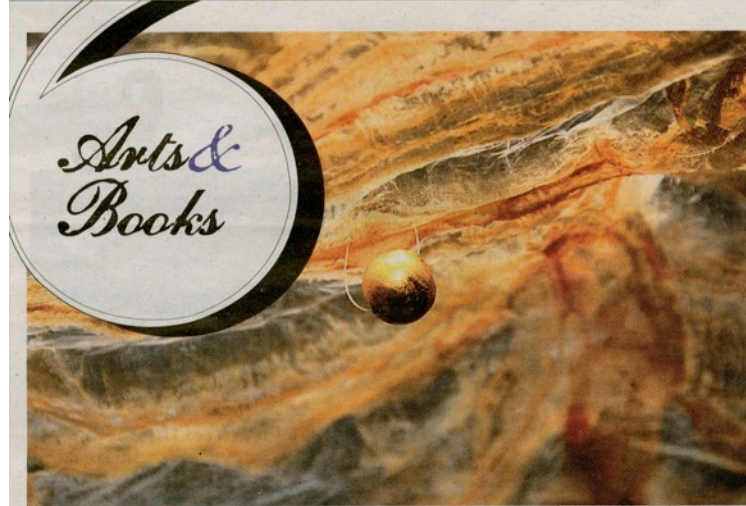




# INDEPENDENT

14 Viewpaper

THE INDEPENDENT TUESDAY 27 SEPTEMBER 2011



## The joy of art à la carte

What does a Michelin-starred restaurant do with its food scraps? Thanks to its artist in residence, it turns them into intriguing installations, says **Alice Jones**

**I** don't eat fish anymore," says Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva, lightly wrinkling her nose at the plate of two-Michelin-starred monkfish in liquorice sauce that has just wafted past the table. "It has such a distinctive smell." We're in Pied à Terre, a staple of the London fine dining scene for 20 years – not, in other words, the kind of place you'd expect an artist to turn their nose up at

a free lunch. But Hadzi-Vasileva, 40, is no ordinary artist. She's the restaurant's first artist-in-residence and as such has spent the last eight months eating in the dining room, observing in the kitchens and gadding up the scraps – fish skins, quail bones and scallop scrapings – to create an unusual series of à la carte installations.

From now until the end of October, gastronomes at the intimate Charlotte Street restaurant will dine on

haute cuisine surrounded by leftovers and other fare fit for the kitchen bins – a sculpture made of skate bones in the dining room, a Hirst-style boxed battalion of 200 quail carcasses in the upstairs bar and a delicate lampshade made of scallop skirt in the airy front room. Elsewhere, the staircase has been lined with tiles smeared in scallop corals while – the *pièce de résistance*, this – the skylight has been covered with 80 translucent white globes

which, on closer inspection, turn out to be dried sheep testicles.

My main course of black-leg chicken arrives. "Oh good," says Hadzi-Vasileva, peering greedily at my plate. "I'm glad you ordered that, I need more wish-bones. They make great patterns." In case it wasn't already clear, Hadzi-Vasileva has an unconventional relationship with food. Her previous works include a couture ball gown made out of dried chicken skins, a walk-through installation of pig-stomach curtains and a three-metre-high wall of butter.

She was picked to be the first in a series of annual residents at the restaurant by a panel of 12 curators and art-world figures, including the head of the Slade, John Aiken, and David Moore, director of Pied à Terre, in November. Where some artists might have seen the gig – a £10,000 grant and £2,500 of dining credits – as an opportunity to load up on truffles and lobsters, Hadzi-Vasileva chose to earn her meal ticket in the most gruelling way. Day after day, she sat quietly in the corner of the tiny, sweaty basement kitchen, scooping up discarded scallop beards and slimy monkfish skins and picking chicken bones out of stock pots. Then, after a busy lunchtime service, loaded down with entrails and off-cuts, she would set off back to her studio outside Brighton to start the real work. She spent months experimenting with the scavenged materials, wash-

ing them in detergent, preserving them, drying them out and eventually moulding them in to her equivalent of canvas or clay. Forget Polly Morgan's trendy stuffed magpies, this is taxidermy 2.0. And it's unpleasant, nauseating work.

"I spent four months cleaning fish skins," she says, which explains her earlier aversion to the monkfish. "It's sort of meditative after a while. And when the smell becomes unbearable, I wear a mask." The joy of the works lies in the witty disconnect between the unlovely materials and process and the aesthetically pleasing final product. "When you talk about it, it sounds disgusting," she says. "But when you see it, it's beautiful." She's right. If you didn't know it (and you don't get too close), you'd never guess that the ethereal white globes filtering the sunlight on the ceiling were hollowed-out sheep testicles or that the trendy tiger-print tiles on the staircase were made of the inedible bits of scallops.

In a restaurant where every plate leaves the pass looking like a miniature work of art – a splash of gremolata here, a macerated apricot there – it's a quirky waste-not, want-not reminder of what goes into, and is left out of, the finished dishes. Like the head chef, Marcus Eaves, Hadzi-Vasileva works only with the finest ingredients, but she finds beauty in the less-loved bits. Many of the works were inspired by the processes she saw in the kitchens – coiling, rolling, pressing and



**Lovely bones:** (clockwise from top left) detail from Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva's 'Skirts Up Please'; the artist in the kitchen at Pied à Terre; detail from 'My Beautiful Army', made from quail carcasses; translucent white globes, made from dried sheep testicles, shine from the ceiling of the dining room

SEAN GIBSON;  
NAVIGR/SIMON HARVEY;  
CATHERINE SUTTON

stretching. "For the tiles I used the same process they use for making their bread rolls," she says. She spent weeks painting the backbones of her "quail army" in 23.5 carat gold leaf, a "pathetically slow process" which reflects the attention lavished on each plate at the pass.

Born in Macedonia, Hadzi-Vasileva's work has always been rooted in the natural world. For her degree show at the Glasgow School of Art in 1996, she "planted" a whole Scots pine – roots in the basement, leaves poking out of the roof – in the staircase of the Mackintosh building. Since then her work has been a series of organic reactions to, and reflections of, her surroundings. She's hung half-ton slices of Canadian redwood in a Bury St Edmunds copse and planted a dead tree upside down outside a health centre in Bristol. In 2000, she made her first "food" work, a wall of butter bricks which was followed by a "road to nowhere" made of watercress and floating in a Northumberland reservoir.

It was a commission in Berwick that led her on to her "decomposition" phase. Inspired by two local industries – the armed forces and fishing – she created a large-scale, site-specific work of 3,500 regimentally arranged salmon skins. "I've got really horrible memories of making that piece. I got halfway through and there was no going back," she says. "I had to get through it to the end." A related work, *Reoccurring Undulation*, an

installation of 960 salmon skin tiles, has recently been on show at Eastbourne's Towner art gallery as part of their Compulsive, Obsessive, Repetitive exhibition. Viewed from afar, it looks like a shimmering, silvery tapestry. Before Pied à Terre, she was busy experimenting with caul fat, or the membranes from a pig's stomach. In Valenciennes, a town famous for its lace-making and offal cut-

— "There are some materials that I'd like to push a bit further, like monkfish skins. When they dry, they look like landscapes as seen from an aeroplane"

sine, she hung it in wispy curtains and has since pressed it into decorative tiles reminiscent of recent Gilbert and George.

They'd work a treat in a macho meat house like Smiths or Hawksmoor. Indeed, Hadzi-Vasileva's work is part of a long and illustrious tradition of art in restaurants (see box), from the paintings Picasso and Miro left on the walls at La Colombe d'Or instead of paying the bill to Rothko's Seagram murals, painted for the swanky restaurant at



### Fine dining: restaurants with art collections

#### Scott's

The oyster bar is a work of art in itself, but the Mayfair restaurant also features an up-to-the-minute collection, including a Rebecca Warren sculpture nestled between the banquettes, a Gary Hume flower painting on the back wall and a stuffed black gull by Polly Morgan in reception.

#### Cut

Just opened in the new 45 Park Lane hotel, Wolfgang Puck's chophouse has 16 of Damien Hirst's round butterfly 'Psalm' prints, the most ever assembled together, hanging on its walls (above).

#### Sketch

The eccentric London restaurant's rolling series of exhibitions has featured Tracey Emin, John Baldessari, Isaac Julien and Yves Klein over the years. The permanent collection includes work by Julie Verhoeven and a reception desk designed by Ron Arad.

#### Number One

The Michelin-starred restaurant at Edinburgh's Balmoral Hotel features floor-to-ceiling prints by recent art school graduates – like a miniature Royal Academy summer show.

#### Whitechapel Dining Room

A bit of a cheat this, but visitors to the restaurant – co-designed by Rachel Whiteread – at the east London gallery can feast on Angela Hartnett's modern cuisine surrounded by Christian Boltanski's "social" sculpture 'Vie Impossible Whitechapel'.

New York's Four Seasons (he aimed to paint "something that will ruin the appetite of every son-of-a-bitch who ever eats in that room", but eventually reneged on the commission).

When the Pied à Terre exhibition closes at the end of October, the quail army will enter the permanent collection, where it will hang alongside works by Peter Blake, Howard Hodgkin and Richard Hamilton, who was a director of the restaurant. Moore met the late artist when he was working at Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons in Oxfordshire in the 1980s. When he opened Pied à Terre in 1991, Hamilton came on board as a backer and lent works from his own collection to be exhibited in the restaurant.

Meanwhile, Hadzi-Vasileva has been working around the clock to install her show, putting in several overnight stints to avoid the packed lunchtime and dinner services. The work, though, is never really done. "I get bored of using the same material. There are some materials I'd like to push a bit further, like monkfish skins. They're very thin and extremely difficult to work with. When they dry, they look like landscapes as seen from an aeroplane," she says. "And after that I've got a chest freezer full of white rats I need to get on with."

*The Wish of the Witness, Pied à Terre, London W1 (www.artist-in-restaurant.co.uk) to 31 October*

## The Tuesday Book

# Surreal tale is absurdly entertaining



### THE MILKMAN IN THE NIGHT

By Andrey Kurkov

HARVILL SECKER, £12.99

Order for £11.69 (free p&np) from the Independent Bookshop. 08430 600 030

The Ukrainian writer Andrey Kurkov compares his narrative to a cracked windscreen, fracturing out in all directions. In this novel (translated by Amanda Love Darragh), the multiple satirical stories wrap around one another, beginning with a single event: a shooting in a Kiev street. It radiates into the worlds of other characters, through the city and out into the peasant countryside.

In the hands of a less skilful writer, this loose structure would be a dangerous technique. But Kurkov entices us along all the fault-lines of his bizarre world, where a young man sleepwalks through a double life and a widow notices her embalmed husband has fresh dirt on his unworn shoes.

A vital figure is the young mother, Irina. British fans grew to love Kurkov through the enigmatic presence in earlier works of a penguin rescued from a zoo. The penguin does not feature in this work, but his symbolism is partly conveyed by the plump figure of Irina – stolid, yet capable of bearing enormous mythological weight.

If the penguin sometimes stood for the freed but flightless post-Soviet Ukraine,

— Kurkov entices us along all the fault-lines of his bizarre world, where a young man sleepwalks through a double life

Irina is the country as "single mother". Literally, for Irina is a wet nurse under a system which buys her breast milk for just enough to keep her and her own child alive: a state-commercialised form of the practice under the Tsars.

Her baby is fed on formula, while she goes to express her milk at a human dairy where it disappears into bottles to nourish an infant of a senior apparatchik. Driven by a desire to find out the identity of this child, Irina begs the services of an ambitious young official. This turns into a minefield, for a party official has a special demand for Irina's milk.

Another citizen trying to survive is Dima, a dog-handler searching baggage at an airport. When his German shepherd tracks down a suitcase full of ampoules, Dima and his friends appropriate it, and soon the mysterious liquid is spreading its effects all over Kiev. It has amazing revitalising powers, reviving Dima's dead cat until it overcomes a bulldog. Like Irina, Dima is an elemental character. He can be raised to a near-mystical contentment by delight in the simplest things – black bread rubbed with onion, sunlight – and rejoins the animal kingdom as "a creature of God whose only aim was to live and enjoy life". But is anything really changing in the newly liberated country?

JANE JAKEMAN