

History, grandeur ... and fine cuisine

By Joanna Blythman

Hutchesons
158 Ingram Street, Glasgow
0141 552 4050
Lunch **£15-49** Dinner **£40-60**
Food rating **8/10**

IT'S a struggle to protect and preserve historic buildings of architectural merit. The leaking roofs, the rising damp, the jaw-dropping heating bills, the constant pressure from developers to demolish and replace with something new that will last years, not decades or centuries.

Opposite Central Station in Glasgow, Alexander "Greek" Thomson's Egyptian Halls is a case in point. Prospects are looking up for this dilapidated A-lister since a trust has been formed to apply for funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund. If it comes up trumps – a decision is expected in the spring – and if Historic Scotland and Glasgow City Council chipped in, then a refurbished future for Egyptian Halls could be secured as a hotel and shops. Fingers crossed.

It's always good to see beautiful old buildings given a second life, not as heritage theme parks, but as going concerns, and this is what has happened with Hutchesons' Hall. Everyone who knows Ingram Street will recognise the building's distinctive octagonal clock tower. The hall was originally conceived as a hospice for impoverished old men, eventually taken on by the National Trust (sigh of relief), but then it had to be closed five years ago after a damaging storm. Since then, the Trust has carried out a series of external repair works



in the hope of finding a tenant, and happily one has come along in the form of James Rusk, of Butchershop fame.

Bravo, Mr Rusk! The results of this collaboration are magnificent. The day-to-day workings of a busy brasserie and bar invigorate the building without compromising its integrity. The double-height hall – with its original stained glass windows, cornicing, flooring and mirrors tarnished with age – is nothing short of breathtaking. Frankly, I'd tolerate inferior food just to be in the place, but what a delicious bonus that

Hutchesons isn't serving up the customary chain brasserie mediocrity.

Of course, you have to swallow the prices, which are high, but not steep, given the setting. After all, we're talking big steaks, platters of fruits de mer, lobster and caviar, not happy-eater meal deals for the family. Starters range from £7-13, mains creep up to £49. When I saw the bill, I wished that I had thought to ask the cost of the Iberico pork special – £32 – but I was carried away by our waitress's mouthwatering description. Still, it didn't turn out to be an overstatement. It was a

magnificent bit of meat that fully lived up to the famous pig's reputation: soft, sapid pork, succulent under its burnished, mahogany exterior, aromatised by a smoky whiff, possibly from the roasted garlic that accompanied it. My only complaint here was that the portion was enough for two people, so why not halve the amount and serve at £16? We ate it anyway; no way was meat this good going back to the kitchen. The same super-sized portion principle applied to the £20 main course *salade Niçoise*, a massive hunk of thrillingly fresh tuna – I'd guess 300 gram raw – cooked immaculately, that is, seared on the outside and still pink at the core. It dwarfed the salad it sat on, which could have been bulked up and improved. (I suggest a look at chef Simon Hopkinson's recipe, which captures the essence of the Mediterranean speciality.) But the fish itself was so dazzling it stole the show, so the salad's second-rateness wasn't a cardinal fault.

Hutchesons seems to have its seafood sourcing down to a tee. Dressed crab as a starter at £12.95 makes a dent in the wallet, but the crustacean was again, pulse-racingly fresh, without a trace of shell, and nicely presented. Roasted bone marrow would have been improved by a simpler treatment: the additions of sweet onion jam, sweet brioche and a rather vinegary parsley salad kicked it out of balance.

Desserts are classic, so there was a well-made *crème brûlée* with buttery home-made shortbread, and an Anglophone treatment of *poires Belle Hélène* – poached pears with vanilla ice cream and chocolate sauce – presented as a sundae. With its extravagant flourishes of whipped cream, it matched the exuberance of Hutchesons décor perfectly.

BAR STOOL

By Andy Gemmell



Alston Bar and Grill
79 Gordon Street
Glasgow

What is it: The Glendola leisure group have invested £1 million in this city centre bar and restaurant which opened in May of this year. The Alston takes its name from an old forgotten street which connected Argyle Street with Gordon Street until the mid-1870s. As you walk into this basement bar and restaurant you can tell that no expense has been spared in its refurbishment. There is beautiful tiled flooring. Chandeliers made from decanters, a 20ft marble bar and low ambient lighting along with the stunning natural shape of the basement make this venue a perfect escape from the bustling city centre.

Interesting fact: The Alston is built in the basement of Central Station, which has been undeveloped since the 1800s when the station was built over Grahamston village. Grahamston is a forgotten piece of Glasgow history. It vanished more than 100 years ago, but its memory lives on in buildings, in street patterns and not least in the urban legend of an abandoned village beneath the platforms.

Verdict: Glasgow's city centre revival continues with this arrival. Although it is doing that thing of jumping on the band wagon with the meat and gin concept it is still a welcome addition to city centre life. Staff are friendly, efficient and knowledgeable. Worth a visit.

Drinks: There are more than 50 on show with a focus on the Scottish side of the juniper spirit. They have a great wee selection of beers, a cocktail menu and the option to have cardamom and orange zests added to your G&T.

Food: They have a Montague grill, which any meat lover knows is one of the best for a great burger or steak.

Price: Maybe a bit steep for some city centre dwellers, but you get what you pay for.

Alfresco: Just back up the stairs for some fresh air.

Children: Child-friendly if dining **Avoid if:** You prefer your venue light and with views.

Perfect for: Showing friends what Glasgow has to offer.

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