

FOOD

Alluring luxury restaurant at a landmark classic motor showroom

Many of north London's drivers will be familiar with Hexagon. Occupying a large showroom near the bottom of the Bishops Avenue in East Finchley since 1997, it was London's principal BMW dealership for over 45 years.

The man behind the brand, Paul Michaels, has revved his way through pretty much every aspect of the automotive universe since renting his first garage in Hampstead for £7.50 per week in 1963.

In a career encompassing his own Formula One team in the '70s, to representing prestigious marques like Porsche, Lotus and Alfa Romeo, the affable septuagenarian now resides in the rarefied world of ultra-collectables. From a 1961 Mercedes 300SL (yours for £1.1 million) to a Ferrari Daytona, and a plethora of Porsches, Hexagon Classics' droolworthy display of motoring heritage has heads turning and noses pressed up against the windows of the 143 bus, all day long.

But while Michaels, whose metabolism is probably propelled along by one-pint blood to seven pints Castrol GTX, is clearly auto-obsessed, there are other corners of the good life he steers into.

Unsurprisingly, the South of France, in all its bucolic gastronomic glory has played a part. After all, the whole point of

REVIEW

Hexagon, Bishops Avenue

having a Porsche to hand is to point it at Provence now and then, surely. In the 1980s, inspired by a favourite Provençal restaurant, he opened Number One Hampstead Lane, in Highgate. Redolent of the era, it was a fabulously buzzy big space full of people with big hair; never bettered by the many restaurants that followed.

Now comes number two. In recent years, part of the showroom had been repurposed for Michaels' late wife, ceramics connoisseur and interior designer Racheline, to operate a gallery. That's morphed into Bottles 'N' Jars, a Mediterranean inspired delicatessen and wine emporium curated by sommelier Bert Blaize, late of Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons and the Clove Club, along with an event space.

Centre stage, though, is The Engine Rooms restaurant. With an expansive terrace boasting a retractable roof and a phalanx of industrial-strength heaters, it's match-ready for battle with the British weather.

Right inside the entrance, a bar next to the cars, looking down onto the mesmerising array of multicoloured metallica, draws customers like lemmings toward their "aperitif amidst the



Some of the vehicles at Hexagon Classics in East Finchley

automobiles", moment. Further inside, an industrial-chic design template predominates with austere greys and blacks softened by artworks and motorsport memorabilia.

Whilst "Mediterranean" remains the watchword for the entire enterprise, the dining spaces could just as easily be channelling something New World – California maybe, or East Finchley by way of East Hampton.

The welcome sight of an open kitchen has head chef James Harrison and his team on full display, busily concocting some very refined, calorie-conscious cuisine. This is creative cooking of a standard that the residents of Heathville have habitually had to travel outside the area for. Notably, there are five fish mains to just two meat ones, with beef conspicuously and purposely absent. Sourcing remains rigorous and as localised as possible.

A signature starter of grey mullet ceviche with a confit tomato dressing, samphire and pistachio proved as impressive as it sounds, as did robata octopus, with the burrata in fig jam, radicchio, pomegranate dressing, dukkha spice crumb, also excellent.



The halibut T-bone at The Engine Rooms

Of the mains, steamed hake was perfectly presented in a fennel and carrot escabeche and smoked cod roe mousse. Salt marsh Cornish lamb rack, meanwhile, was cooked to melt-in-the-mouth pinky perfection, balanced delicately on its bed of toasted fregola, peas,

broad beans, green sauce and rosemary jus: a delectable concoction of pulses, for which "moreish" would be inadequate. It could be liquidised it and taken intravenously.

Pastry chef Darren Cafferty's skill-set, honed at venues like Roux



The Engine Rooms in East Finchley



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The salt marsh lamb at The Engine Rooms



A starters selection at the Engine Rooms

Pictures: CHARLIE MCKAY

in Parliament Square, confirmed a pâtissier of quality, with dessert offerings such as pistachio mille-feuille, comprised of baklava, candied walnuts and crispy cinnamon pastry.

An aubergine starter erred dangerously close to blandness, but with so many high notes successfully hit, and the restaurant's soft opening hardly over, a blind eye is readily turned.

Service, from a team as joyful as they were youthful, under the experienced tutelage of manager Jason, was on point.

The calibre of cuisine is undoubtedly elevated. As is the

restaurant's price point, placing it in line with other upscale eateries. Obviating the need for a West End journey, however, coupled with the utterly unique allure of gastronomic indulgence whilst

embedded into one of Europe's most coveted classic car collections, should keep the Engine Rooms firing on all cylinders.

Andrew Harris