



Capital

A THE CAPITAL RESTAURANT, BASIL STREET, SW3; T 020 7589 5171; P £80PP INCLUDING WINE; W CAPITALHOTEL.CO.UK

I've never been a great fan of Knightsbridge, with its cavernous palaces of opulence and chichi department stores flooded with tourists in search of the cheapest product on offer just so they can get a bag. Yes, it's very close to Hyde Park and pretty convenient, but then so are plenty of other places where, frankly, I'd rather spend my time. That said, as a Londoner I'm always welcome for any excuse to love even the most offensive corner of our beloved city, and as far as Knightsbridge and I are concerned, that excuse is the Capital.

Tucked safely away from the bustling throng in an inconspicuous (if rather grand) townhouse on Basil Street, The Capital Hotel has provided a welcoming and luxurious haven for the well-heeled since it opened its doors in 1969. Its restaurant has been long been a beacon of fine dining, winning its first Michelin star in 1974 and a second in 2001. The past few months have seen a period of change, however, with Jérôme Ponchelle (previously of Wiltons and the Connaught) installed as executive chef and that second Michelin star struck off earlier this year.

2010, then, is an important year for the Capital, and I can happily report that the early signs are very promising indeed. Though unsurprisingly a little quiet – our

midweek visit was during one of those ferociously cold snaps in January when every day threatened the dawn of a new ice age and everyone carried hip flasks and a bar of Dairy Milk in case they got lost in a blizzard – the Capital's small dining room was pleasantly atmospheric.

But it's the classically styled French menu that really grabs the attention – an amuse-bouche of tempura sole in a white bean velouté setting a strong precedent that the rest of the menu had no problem following. Haddock carpaccio to start was Ponchelle's philosophy on a plate – unfussy and unpretentious, but brimming with robust flavours – while tournedos of filet mignon (presumably sourced from bovine royalty) were matched by the impossibly light truffle potato served alongside. Service was attentive, helpful and unobtrusive throughout.

The wine list is expertly composed too, as you might expect from a restaurant whose proprietor, David Levin, owns a winery in the Loire Valley. My partner accompanied her Lobster thermidor with a Vincent Girardin puligny-montrachet, and a distinctive Jura vin de paille from Domaine Rolet – packed with dried fruit – was a genuine treat and the perfect companion to my prune soufflé.

If this year offers a challenge for the Capital, it's one it appears well equipped to meet. And Knightsbridge? All is forgiven. –Jon Hawkins

