



The Gannet: portioning blame, Bill Knott

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There's an old Woody Allen joke about two women having dinner at a Catskill Mountains resort. "Boy," says one, "the food here is really terrible." "Yeah, I know," replies her friend, "and such small portions!"

This exchange often springs to mind in the middle of tasting menu, one of those nine-course extravaganzas in which Cheffy serves up rather too many dishes you did not want, as well as minuscule portion of the dish you did want. For the full experience of tortuous torpor, each dish should be accompanied not just by a different wine, but a prolonged lecture on its provenance. The meal should last at least three hours, food emerging from the kitchen only when a suitable chance to interrupt an interesting conversation arises. Eventually, all attempts at speech are abandoned, the exhausted diners pausing only for a bag of chips on their way home to bed.

Even attempts to order a la carte can be frustrated by the number of amuse-bouches and little dishes – foam is invariably involved – doled out by the kitchen. At one such establishment, I complained about the tiny sliver of lamb served as my main course. "Oh," said the maître d', slightly taken aback, "we give you so many other things that we scale down the main course." Yes, but I didn't order any of that stuff. I just wanted lamb.

There are exceptions. One of the best restaurants I have been to in recent months is called Van Zeller, in the genteel spa town of Harrogate. Chef Tom van Zeller is a superb cook, but he is not a show-off, even in his tasting menus, which feature classic combinations (the one I tried had gazpacho with crab; John Dory with samphire and fennel; foie gras with mango and a sticky reduction

of port) beautifully, respectfully cooked. Then - it being Sunday lunchtime - he dished up a proper portion of rare roast beef: Yorkshire folk do not hold with the concept of Lilliputian cuisine. Dishes arrived (and were dispatched) swiftly; service was friendly but unobtrusive; and a thoroughly good time was had by all. If only all restaurants had the style and substance of Van Zeller.

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One wonders whether chefs ever sit down and eat their way through their own tasting menus; if they did, they might realise just how tedious they can be. Waiting half an hour for a scallop is particularly irksome, especially with an empty glass, which – since wines are scaled down as severely as the food – is highly probable.

Much is made these days of restaurants as theatre, with dinner transformed into an epic production: most playwrights, however, understand that three acts is probably enough for their audience to stomach in a single night. It is a lesson from which today's chefs might well learn: even Shakespeare, after all, had the sense to chop *Henry IV* in half.