

SECOND ACT

Pierre's is the second turn in Dubai for France's famous molecular gastronomist, who reopens at the same location but with a wildly different proposition, this time Pierre Gagnaire is inviting diners to step into the tropical side of Parisian bistro dining.
by **matt pomroy**

With a reinvention and a return to the city that once lauded and loved him, Pierre Gagnaire is back in Dubai. His previous restaurant, Reflets, ran from 2008 until its closure in 2016 and was the Gallic temple of molecular fine dining, regarded by many as the best restaurant in the city. But times changed, Dubai changed, and eyes and wallets turned to new tables.

Gagnaire's return acknowledges changes in the dining scene. It's no longer the lavish romp through the excesses of French food, from champagne on arrival, through foams and fancy, to an inevitable ending swaddled in a gouty delirium of fine cheese and sauterne. This is 2018 and restaurants, like their diners, are dressing more casually.

Located on the site of his previous establishment, Pierre's remains a sizeable place with 115 seats, but there are areas in which to hunker down including some cosy covered booths that are idea for late-night dining.

The homemade bread is as good as it ever was, with exceptional butter that thankfully suggests Pierre can't quite be himself to loosen the top button of his white jacket when it comes to any details. There's no scrimping on quality here, though the dishes on offer range from the solidly simple to the more theatrical, typical Gagnaire productions. You can order a plate of cured ham or some simple Arancini croquettes and just as you start to think it might not be a place to wow you, the madeleines flavoured with rosemary and Parmesan cheese arrive and take your breath away with their bite-sized perfection. Presented in a row of six, it's perhaps this dish that best exemplifies what Pierre's is all about. Warm French cake gives way to release a waft of rosemary that sets you up perfectly for a hit of Parmesan crisp. It's a superb little combination and if these were sold in a bakery, it's the kind of thing that would make that bakery famous, not because they're wildly original (there's a hundred recipes for these online) but because they're exceptionally well done. In fact, they're high on the list of best things we've eaten this year.

And this place will stand or fall on its ability to offer something others don't. A report from Dubai Municipality recently stated that 473 food outlets were opened in the first half of 2018 – from fast casual to fine dining. Even if you ate out at a different place every night, there would still be more places opening than you were able to keep up with, so now more than ever it's about choosing somewhere that offers something you haven't tried before or something you can't get elsewhere.

So thankfully here comes the Gorgonzola and burrata ice cream with Campari tomatoes, which is not just a twist on the well-worn burrata dish but a total reinvention. The creamy

white island of savoury ice cream sits in the middle of soup dish surrounded by a moat of chilled tomato soup – it's unique to this restaurant. You might love it, hate it, like only parts of it, but it's something noteworthy and new and once you've tried it you'll want to tell other people about it.

The Madagascan prawns with black bread, preserved lemon and smoked spinach is another twist on familiar ingredients. It arrives in a theatrical late-night cloud of icy smoke and is a mix of flavours you probably haven't tried before. While the mains page of the menu offers Wagyu and veal and slices of duck with foie gras and cranberry sorbet it also offers the PG burger for AED98. Yes, it's a \$27 burger, but it's also a fantastic burger made with high-grade meat, topped with a bun of perfect consistency and cooked just right. And sometimes that's just what you want, and Pierre shows that you can make concessions to casual bistro dining while maintaining a standard befitting the reputation.

Desserts mean an apple tart with whipped cream flavoured with Calvados and chocolate ice cream which is sweet spot of a Venn diagram where late-night indulgence meets France. It's designed to share largely by dint of its richness being too much for one but buried in here is the soul of the classic French bistro food given the Gagnaire uplift.

The adjacent lounge has sofas, ivy-covered walls and kitsch pink flamingos, and there's a DJ, all designed to create a space that invites you to stay for one more, perhaps two. It's a nice idea and a concession to the late-night dining crowd.

It's a totally different menu to Reflets and yes, it's technically a bistro, but one where you can order a Dhs91,000 bottle Remy Martin Louis XIII to go with your lobster linguine. And while the location in Festival City isn't going to do it many favours – this would be ideal in DIFC for a Thursday night – it is the sort of place that will become some people's favourite restaurant, while others will try it once and never return. And that's fine, there are more restaurants opening every week.

But when you add up all the little components it become clearer that this restaurant is a targeted and considered endeavour. The smaller-dish sharing concept is in place, there are outlandish flourishes, the cutlery is Hermès, the decorators didn't scrimp on the gold, everywhere you look is an Instagram post waiting to happen, there's a DJ playing House music and over there is a group of people with notable haircuts ordering a second bottle of champagne on a Monday night.

The food may well be bistro French-fusion but, in many ways, right now this is perhaps the most Dubai restaurant in the city.

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Pierre Gagnaire has reimagined the space previously occupied by Reflets. It now focuses on more relaxed fare, but with his name literally above the door, his signature touch of culinary creativity remains very much in evidence. Expect flashes of brilliance throughout the carefully crafted menu.

