Dainty plates eatery all the rage in London

Mike Grenby
Bond University, Mike_Grenby@bond.edu.au

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Dainty plates eatery all the rage in London

London chef’s travels inspire his innovative, healthy menu

MIKE GRENBY
FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

When Nuno Mendes dishes out lunch and dinner, he often uses tweezers to put the food on the plate. That’s because some of the ingredients are so small he couldn’t handle them with anything else. And he needs to make sure many of the food items – like tiny flowers – are the right way up.

Mendes is the chef-owner of Viajante, one of London’s hottest new restaurants. Opened in April, the 40-seat restaurant offers only three choices for dinner: a tasting menu comprising six, nine or 12 courses. You are introduced to each course as it appears on the table. If you insist, you can get a copy of the menu after the meal.

At Viajante, which means “traveller” in both Portuguese and Spanish, the diner is meant to take a journey with every mouthful. “I want my food to surprise and delight my guests,” said Mendes, who grew up on his family’s dairy farm in Portugal.

“I am passionate about the food I cook,” he said, “from the ingredients we source to ensuring that every meal is indulgent but healthy.”

“It’s hard work, experimenting to combine different flavours and textures, dealing with the failures as well as the sudden inspirations that lie behind the final success.”

The 12 courses I sampled, which according to the number of photos I took actually came to 18 courses by the time you add the complimentary appetizers and desserts and special bread, included dishes like:

- Squid tartare and pickled radishes, samphire (a green plant that grows in tidal marshes) and squid ink jus (frozen like a slushie).
- Olive soup with Greek yogurt, ginger and pistachio crumbs.
- Pig’s neck and prawn, Savoy cabbage, fried capers and grated egg.
- Aged sirloin of beef and chunky mash, ramson onions and burned fennel.
- Carrot mousse, sweet and salt pickled plum, and learning the bold flavours of southwest U.S. cuisine in New Mexico.

He said he has also been inspired by travelling through Japan where he tasted freshly made umeboshi (a tart, tangy, salt pickled plum), and learning the bold flavours of southwest U.S. cuisine in New Mexico. He avoids too much fat, salt and sugar in his dishes, favouring various herbs and spices instead to give the food interesting and appealing flavours. I’m sure that’s the main reason, along with the small portion sizes, my four-hour dinner left me feeling comfortably, rather than uncomfortably, full.

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“If you’re in London for the nine courses and 30 per cent for the 12 courses. Diners sitting in the front section of the restaurant have a great view of all the food being prepared in the open kitchen. The staff use a book to keep track of courses which have been served to which tables. Most of Mendes employees are under 30. “I believe in giving something back by helping train young people who are interested in the business,” he said.

His partner, Clarise Faria, runs The Loft Project. Originally set up as a temporary supper club and personal test kitchen, the Loft has now become a platform for the next generation of talented chefs to take up residency and showcase their food.

Chefs are invited from top kitchens around the world to host dinners for guests around one communal table in Mendes’ own home.