

Wellington

Hippopotamus

HIPPOPOTAMUS

★★★★

Museum Hotel, 90 Cable St,
ph: 04-802 8935, museumhotel.co.nz
Breakfast, lunch, dinner 7 days
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Who would name their restaurant after a fat, ugly, foul-tempered beast that kills more people than any other animal in Africa? We might imagine Hippopotamus as a zoo café, or even a steakhouse that promised to fatten you into one, but this Hippopotamus is a dainty fine-dining restaurant where the food comes as dots, cubes and squiggles, surrounded by copious white space.

Having made their branding decision, the management has stuck with it: wherever you look – on the menu, or your wine glass – there's the nasty beast.

Almost as unfortunate as the name is the location, deep in the bowels of a hotel, next to a busy arterial traffic route with bad parking.

Yet I beg you to overlook both faults, for once you've made your way through the gallery of contemporary New Zealand art that lines the foyer of the Museum Hotel, your mood should lift, improving further when you get to the third-floor restaurant and realise that, the restaurant being built on two levels, almost every table has a view of Te Papa and the panorama of the harbour.

NICOLA EDMONDS

Then there's the superior cuisine of French-born Laurent Loudeac, formerly chef at Hummingbird. He has flourished in this environment, elaborating on Provençale cuisine with creations like snapper on Niçoise salad with anchovy powder and a tapenade dressing.

While the tournedos, sirloins and the 400g ribs of beef should placate the business lunch hippopotamuses, this is essentially a repertoire for aesthetes.

If you don't get the subtle humour, the \$24 small entrée "deconstructed progression of sashimi my way" might be scorned as pretentious. A line of raw salmon cubes is arrayed down an oblong platter, each progressively adding an ingredient layer – a tiny square of soy jelly, an ultra-thin cucumber ribbon, a pile of marinated wakame – until the construction is completed with a sprinkling of sesame seeds.

The duck dégustation plate ("saveurs du monde") offers duck confit and foie

gras in a rich, creamy arancini (Italian); Peking duck jelly; quail egg and soy dressing (Asian); and seared duck breast on a duck parfait crostini (French).

As with the cuisine, so with the sophisticated wine list and service: maître d' Timothée Lepoutre swiftly attends to your needs with the same French formality he brought to his last job, at London's Lanesborough Hotel.

And at dessert time, when you still have room for that burnished tarte Tatin, made the original way with apple, you are thankful for the absence of hippo-sized portions.

DAVID BURTON

