

WHERE TO EAT IN EDINBURGH

By Caroline Phillips



Image courtesy of Danil Vnouchkov

Where offers the best dining experiences and ingredients north of the border? Edinburgh. It's renowned for its fine food scene. If Michelin accolades are your thing, then the city is home to four restaurants with a star. But if the prissiness of such eateries is not your bag, then there are few places better for unpretentious fare than Fhior, which opened last year. Fhior lives up to its name, which means 'true' in Gaelic. It offers an excellent and interesting modern Scottish menu with Nordic overtones. Everything's super fresh, seasonal and local and the chef, Scott Smith, is big on the use of unusual herbs such as nasturtium capers (made from nasturtium seeds) and sweet cicely.



Additionally, hoorah, they only do one sitting; so you can eat in a leisurely way. The vibe is, anyway, casual: blond tables, banquettes and a simple space with (mostly) white walls. 'Please give my condiments to the chef,' reads one illustration that hangs there. Plus there are friendly, knowledgeable staff sporting white aprons and white T-shirts. Diners share plates (one-off ceramics with organic forms inspired by Norwegian nature) which simply arrive when the kitchen's ready, and people just keep on and on ordering.

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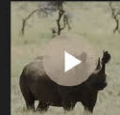
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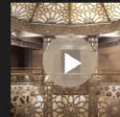
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I love the beremeal bread — an ancient form of heritage barley from Orkney. The Caledonian oysters (£2 each) are a winner, so too the Tamworth ham and leek croquettes (£5.50). The deboned mackerel is succulent — with the sea a very recent memory — and it comes with hispi cabbage soaked overnight in buttermilk, with onion puree and toasted buckwheat with grated pecorino (too many tastes and textures, perhaps).



Then there's a great bavette (skirt, so a deliciously strong flavour), with a chimichurri sauce of parsley, garlic and oregano plus poppy seeds and shallots (£11). Finally the Maurangie Brie stuffed with truffle, and Lanark blue ewes' milk cheese. Oh, and chocolate cake with sweet cicely gel with a hint of damson, all caramelised and piquant. And everything (apparently) accompanied by an unusual wine list of smallholdings: I wouldn't know as I don't drink. The food is delicious and also competitively priced (we ate lunch but even the dinner of four tasting courses is just £40) and unmissable.



Another place you must hot-foot it to is the new [Lookout](#) by Gardener's Cottage, which is open seven days a week and offers Scottish New Wave food. The Lookout has a sister, well, a step-sister really — having opened in partnership with [Collective](#), which promotes contemporary art

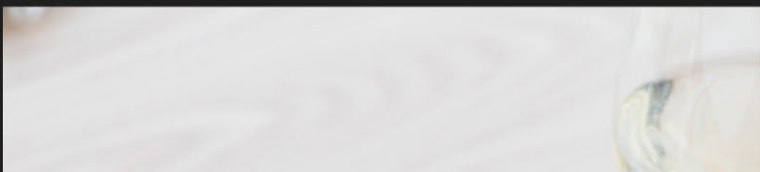
in the City Observatory and in a neighbouring purpose-built exhibition space. The restaurant is also within the City Observatory walls — so, with a visit, you tick off one of the tourist spots too.



The Lookout is a glass house that's light-filled, airy and partially suspended over Calton Hill — it's built on a cantilever. It has unbeatable views (not just of the Georgian city and the Castle but right across to the Firth of Forth) through its glass 'walls'. The décor's unstuffy and Scandi — with a beechwood pyramid ceiling, café-style tables, a polished concrete floor and an open kitchen. If the view is unbeatable, the food is even better. After a rhubarb martini, and bread with butter churned with cream (sooooo light), try the crab with sorrel and scurvy grass (a herb like horseradish) or the Isle of Skye skate (£24) or the Orkney beef with bone marrow hollandaise (£28), then the salted caramel pud — and then you'll know what they eat in culinary heaven. Actually, I'm not going to tell you any more: just go...if you can get in.



If there's sibling rivalry going on, the new-born Lookout is definitely Mummy's favourite. But the Lookout's older brother, the original *Gardener's Cottage* — which, as the name implies was a gardener's cottage, and is still surrounded by a sweet garden of lovage to fennel — is still an essential go-to eaterie (although my most recent meal there was not excellent, as it was on previous occasions). But it's just so quaint, eccentric and gorgeous. You walk up the garden path to the 1836 cottage and then....





It has large Kilner jars in the entrance (containing everything from garlic oil to pickled beetroot), industrial lights, and a rough wooden floor. It offers rustic, seasonal fare (like its younger sister), but made in its teeny open kitchen, and served at communal tables in two rooms. The homemade sour dough's a winner (baked at Quay Commons, another family member, which also provides the Gardener's Cottage with butchered meats and filleted fish). The cod with lobster bisque, Jerusalem artichoke, fennel and cauliflower hits the spot. The set lunch of three courses is a mere £22. The restaurant also offers breakfast (think porridge and tea-soaked prunes).



Finally no visit to Edinburgh is complete without dining casually on flipping-fresh fish and shellfish at one or both of the two [Fishers Restaurants](#). (I haven't tried their third restaurant, the Shore Bar and Restaurant.) If you're sightseeing, Fishers Leith — which opened two decades ago — is seconds from the Royal Yacht Britannia in the docks at Leith. If you're into character in your restaurants, Fishers Leith is also in a 17th century watchtower — and, somehow, always feels as if it's night in there. Plus there's a mermaid above the bar (wood, not real) and a blackboard with daily specials. I love everything there, starting with their fish soup and a mean moules marinière and working my way through the menu. Who (apart from a pescatarian) could resist fillet of Shetland monkfish Saltimbocca, with spelt, beetroot, hazelnut and bramble salad, topped with butter-milk-baked prunes? (2000) This is a delightful meal of fresh

topped with butter milk herb dressing? (£26) Think solid, homely food.



Meanwhile, Fishers in the City is, as the name implies, in the city: in the centre of old Edinburgh. It's the junior of Fishers Leith by about ten years, although the food is better in Leith, the older one. But Fishers in the City is definitely worth a visit for friendly service and brasserie-style meals on simple marble or wood-topped tables, midst decorative rowing boats and oars. It draws a cheery, buzzy crowd. They also sell some of the world's best scallops: hand-dived Orkney ones with brown shrimp butter (£24) and they make a dependable fish curry with coley and prawns (£20). 'Life is good,' as the sign reads here.



If you want fancy Michelin eats, there are four restaurants with a star and at least two wannabes that are almost there. If you hanker for such haute eating, book restaurant 21212 in Royal Terrace — which has the distinction both of being located in the longest Georgian terrace in Europe and also having first earned its star in 2010. Or try The Kitchin (now in its 12th year with a star), The Balmoral's Number One (one star for its 16th consecutive year) or...cue for drum roll...Restaurant Martin Wishart (19th year). There are other Scottish restaurants such as Timberyard (contrary to anything its name might suggest, it's an old brick warehouse with a wood-burning stove) that's probably also in line for a You Know What. (For what it's worth, I like their cured trout, tomato, lovage, wild leek, roe and also the hen's egg, asparagus, hen of the woods, goats butter and hemp dish). Timberyard aside, there was also local dismay that the Castle Terrace was omitted from the 2019 Michelin guide.

Caroline Phillips is an award-winning freelance journalist who contributes to publications from Sunday and daily newspapers to glossy magazines and various luxury websites. To see more of her work, go to www.carolinephillips.net.

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