

Mozart for mains, Puccini for pudding

Avocado and crab tian, followed by pan-seared pheasant – would you like some Mozart with that, madam? Or a side order of Rigoletto?

At the newly opened Bel Canto restaurant in the City of London, diners are entertained during the evening by opera singers, mostly students from the nearby Guildhall music school or the Royal College of Music, who take their turn serving at table between their solos or ensemble pieces.

If the idea of singing students at your table sounds off-putting, be assured they are very good, auditioned personally by the owner of the restaurant, Jean-Paul Maurel, who exported the idea from his two successful Paris venues to tap into the high quality of musical talent being nurtured in London. (You can judge for yourself by listening to our podcast on EducationGuardian.co.uk)

Like two of the students I heard last week, New Zealand-born soprano Carleen Ebbs and tenor Tyler Clarke, performers at Bel Canto are in the difficult territory of having completed music master's degrees and continuing to study while trying to get a toehold on the extremely competitive career lad-



Supper never sounded so good

der. For them an evening singing there is not only a welcome bit of income but a chance to perform in front of a live audience. Very close to a live audience, too – the effect is startling if, like me, you've only ever heard opera on a distant stage.

For the students it is also a chance to sing the lead in big arias rather than be consigned to the chorus. And they are listened to in silence, not treated as background music. The musical menu is reassuringly mainstream – Carmen and the Marriage of Figaro, rather than anything indigestible from the 20th century.

The singers are only too conscious that the credit crunch can make the difficult world of opera even harder to storm. And is London's battered financial centre the best place for this new venture? To which Maurel gives an expressive Gallic shrug. "We're not a bank – people have to enjoy themselves."

Donald MacLeod