

Meet Elliot Moss, the best chef you've never heard of

Elliot Moss serves meals that double as magic tricks. But his perfectionism risks leaving his family homeless, he tells David Ellis



SINGULAR VISION: ELLIOT MOSS IN THE KITCHEN OF HIS RESTAURANT PLU
LUCY YOUNG

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Surprises, by definition, are never found where you expect them. Up from Abbey Road and a good walk from St John's Wood High Street is Blenheim Terrace. It is not one of London's most assuming roads. At one

end, there are the £4 million houses, but at the other is the Post Office collection point that's never open, and a pair of dry cleaners on opposite sides of the road. And among them is an eight-seat fine-dining restaurant, home to one of London's most obsessive, impassioned, meticulous and compulsive chefs. He's also a talker. And no one's ever heard of him.

This is Elliot Moss — actually, Stirling Elliot Moss, but more of that to come — and the restaurant is Plu. In its own words, it serves “a modern international menu with a French accent”, which is a way of obfuscating the fact that it does whatever Moss wants. “I sort of think that everywhere else, there's a compromise somewhere, so here there isn't,” he says.

What does he mean? “Well, look. I don't really like the idea of a tasting menu having supplements, I think that's shitty. Like with the cheese course — does the chef think I should have it or not?”

“And then, I can see the value in being clever with cheaper ingredients, but I like to ensure we're really using the very, very best sourced ingredients.”

So far, so Michelin star. But Moss's creations are a world away from the usual glory-chasing spot. The chef can bore on with the best of them about the differences between caviars, which breed of lobster he rates, and why he has a particular fondness for his olive-fed Yorkshire-Angus crossbreed wagyu. Yawn. It's what he does with his ingredients that astonishes.

There are the place names, designed to look like business cards and delicate enough to please Patrick Bateman — but these are the bread course. Later, there's the pre-dessert, the Plu-Tonic. It's sprayed directly on the tongue. "It's a citrus spritz," explains Moss. "Except the taste is exactly what my memory of Refreshers is. We had a little wrapper made for the atomizer, and it gets people giggling. I just didn't anticipate that people would try to steal them."



WORK OF ART: THE MONROE DISH

LUCY YOUNG

Another favourite is the "Polished Turd Paradox". "I take what I consider is a spectacular turd of a dish, and then I try and polish it up. I'll take all those elements that are turdy" — Moss loves a good swear, in spite of his plummy, public-school delivery — "and

make them better. And then I serve it on a piece of polished turd.” Er, what? “I mean, it happens to be about 60 million years old. But it’s a dinosaur shit. It’s just all that heat and pressure means it’s formed into something like a diamond,” he says, as if all chefs track dinosaur droppings from Utah for what is essentially a culinary joke. Polished dishes have included the pork pie, and at present there is a deconstructed fish n’ chips. “We want to be fun but luxurious, and modern.

“I think probably, you have to get us to like us — but it’s not so in your face that it should offend you, unless you’re looking for it.”

One show-stopper comes as a tile; on it is a riff on Warhol’s Marilyn Monroe, painted using a thickened gazpacho. Diners pick it up — Moss worked to ensure the portrait wouldn’t slide from the tile when held up at an angle — and lick it. “We did have one guest here who said, ‘well, now we know how JFK felt...’”

I didn’t intentionally go into the exam on acid... but when I finished, all of the Beatles looked like Steve Coogan

With a team behind him, perhaps such feats wouldn’t be so arresting, but Moss works in the kitchen alone, though not by choice, and estimates he puts 30 hours prep in before opening for service on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights. Front-of-house is managed single-handedly by his wife Helen. “Sometimes we’d

have a kitchen porter in,” he says. “But we can’t afford that at the moment. The only staff we get are baby-sitters.” The couple have a daughter.

Still, art has been a lifelong thing for the chef; Moss studied it, planning to go on to Saint Martins or the Slade. Distractions got in the way. “By the end of my foundation course, I’d well and truly discovered psychedelic drugs, which I thought was an important part of the process. I did an exam that was supposed to be a portrait of the Beatles, but the night before I’d been watching Alan Partridge. And, well, I didn’t intentionally go into the exam on acid... but I didn’t judge the length of the trip particularly well. When I finished, every one of the Beatles looked like Steve Coogan.”



SQUEAMISH? THE POLISHED TURD DISH, FEATURING 60 MILLION-YEAR-OLD DINOSAUR DROPPINGS

It was not the path his family had anticipated. Though he goes by Elliot, Moss's first name is for his father, Sir Stirling Moss, the British racing driver who won 16 Grand Prix. Though only 42, his was a childhood from a different world. "There was a lot of 'children must be seen and not heard', of standing up straight, Ps and Qs," he says. There were no plans to follow in his father's footsteps; "We weren't even allowed to watch the Grand Prix at home without being spat at — 'Shut up! Don't ask, don't speak over the Grand Prix!' It was very much like being in church or something, sucking all the fun out of it."

Conscious of comparisons, he didn't learn to drive until he was 24 (having first failed his theory test; "insurmountably embarrassing!"). The relationship was seemingly tricky, but he is proud of his father, with one dish shaped like his helmet. "But this wasn't what was expected; they didn't spend all those thousands on my schooling for me to end up in a trade like cooking." He spits the last word as if in mimicry of his horrified family.

His cooking prowess didn't come from Dad, who once put a pizza in the oven "with the wrap on it". Still, Moss Sr had a hand in getting his son going. The driver was at his wits end, with his son having dropped out of art school, worked in removals, and been rejected from a job stacking shelves in Asda ("that was a blow to the old ego", says Moss Jr). It was then the retired F1 star found himself sat next to

Albert Roux at a charity event, and asked Roux if “he could do anything with his useless shithead of a boy”.

The best part of three years’ training at Le Gavroche followed, which killed the drug habit, and then some stints at restaurants across the country. “It was all a very different time,” Moss says, talking of days with chefs sticking burning hot pans on the back of his hands, and kitchen porters being kicked between the stoves. He says he isn’t speaking of one place in particular.



RACING START: ELLIOT WITH HIS PARENTS, SIR STIRLING MOSS AND LADY SUSIE MOSS
REX FEATURES

If Moss's defining characteristic is his perfectionism, it has cost him. Both in difficulties he can find funny — “I wouldn't have put a chandelier with 500 pieces in if I'd know how hard it would be to dust!” — and with more serious concerns, which are financial, and are harder to take lightly. Moss wants his restaurant to work, so keeps his 15-course menu of illusions to £160. For comparison, London's most expensive menu is £420-a-head. But he knows no one has heard of his place and customers are few and far between. When they come, he says, they love it, and two-thirds are regulars.

Even so, it's tricky. Beyond tricky, actually. He lost his father in 2020 after a few years of illness; his mother died this March. The expected windfall, the one he admits gave him the freedom to dream all the ideas up, has not come; the money he has is all tied up with lawyers who, he deadpans, “earn rather more than chefs”.

He is resolute not to play the “poor little rich boy card”. And yet the thing is, he says, “the choice I have is either to sell the restaurant or the flat”. Which would mean making his family homeless. Plu is closed now until a week on Friday, August 11. Go before there is no reopening. Because if it shuts forever, London will have lost one of its best restaurants; no surprise, but a shame.

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