# Moonfish Café, Aberdeen: ‘A crowd-pleasing menu’ – restaurant review

On a grey day in the Granite City, lunch comes with a touch of magic and plenty of welcome colour

[**Moonfish Café**](https://moonfishcafe.co.uk/)**, 9 Correction Wynd, Aberdeen AB10 1HP. Lunch starters £9.95-£10.95, mains £14.95, desserts £8.50, two-course dinner £30, three courses £38, wines from £22**

In the very oldest of cities, the dead are never far from the living. Here at Moonfish Café in Aberdeen, the view, across a narrow, cobbled lane, is of the 12th-century [Kirk of St Nicholas](https://www.stnicholascenter.org/gazetteer/24), a brooding edifice in the city’s familiar palette of wintery greys. It is surrounded on three sides by a graveyard filled with those who built this city: the men of God and the men of mammon and the men of politics, and it is mostly men. Among this monochrome diet of moral rectitude is a flash of colour: the grave of one John Henry Anderson, a 19th-century magician given the stage name the Great Wizard of the North by Sir Walter Scott.

Anderson had many claims to fame. He perfected the bullet catch, and spent much of his latter years exposing the growing armies of spiritualists and mediums who preyed on the vulnerable and the desperate. Best of all, he is credited in some quarters – I won’t be definitive, the world of stage magic is riven by claim and counterclaim – with being the first magician to pull a rabbit from a hat during a stage act.

This writer will be forgiven, I hope, for seeing all this as an analogy just waiting to happen, for the very best restaurant meals really are like a set of joyous rabbits pulled from waiting hats; of reveals and jollity and entertainment. On a day when the colour of the sky matches that of the Aberdonian granite, this is exactly what is needed. Moonfish Café, which originally opened in 2004, looks just the place. It’s a simple, square room with a little beige wood half-panelling and warm, dangling globe lights. For decoration, there are a few globes made of artificial privet that could look naff but don’t. Granted, the radiators aren’t on in here today, despite it being only 10C outside. Then again, this is [Aberdeen](https://www.theguardian.com/uk/aberdeen) in September. I suspect they don’t hold with central heating until you can scratch your initials in the frost on the inside of the window.

No matter. Chef Brian McLeish’s food will quickly warm you up. He arrived at Moonfish in 2011 and in 2014 made it to the [finals](https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2014/dec/23/who-should-win-this-years-masterchef-the-professionals-final?CMP=gu_com) of MasterChef: The Professionals, which means I may already have stood in judgment on his cooking; it all gets a little hazy after a while. That said, there are very few tiresome cheffy touches on display here. No thick sauces are plastered to the plate in a teardrop with the back of a spoon. Nothing is incarcerated on only one side of the plate. Instead, it’s a crowd-pleasing menu of mildly restless bistro food, at very good prices; cooking which never drifts into the culinary equivalent of a fake eyelash or perma-tan.

At lunchtime, starters barely break a tenner while mains are below £15. There’s warm soda bread sweetened with pumpkin to start, with a bowl of a garlicky black olive tapenade and a salty dollop of chive-flecked fromage blanc. A whipped duck liver parfait, firmly in the skin moisturiser territory I so adore, arrives in a Kilner jar, topped with toasted almonds and a tangle of rocket leaves. Below that is a thick layer of Cumberland jelly.

The latter represents a particular tendency of McLeish’s towards the sweet, which will pay fat dividends at the end of the meal. In a main course of monkfish, roasted to mimic the vibrant crimson and honeyed tones of char siu pork, the natural sweetness of the fish makes it a cloying plateful, even allowing for the acidic kick of the cucumber salad on the side. It’s a rare misstep. A chunky slab of fatly stacked prawn toast as a starter, crusted with black and white sesame seeds, may come drizzled with a sweet chilli sauce, but in this case it’s very much welcomed. Squirt on a bit of lime if you want to cut through it.

There’s a bowl of fat Shetland mussels, in a saffron broth the colour of sunflowers, scattered with crisp croutons, and another of beef carpaccio, the deep purple of a bishop’s tonsure shirt, dotted with walnuts and nuggets of blue cheese. There are also asparagus spears, admittedly far out of their season. Here in Aberdeen, many things often are. They come grilled, on a smear of sweet onion purée and under heaped shavings of cured egg yolk and parmesan. Yes, there were four of us. Yes, we had worked out we could nail the entire menu between us if we put our backs into it. Here to serve, and so on.

Alongside that monkfish dish, there was a snowy slab of hake, with purple sprouting broccoli, a sauce vierge and horseradish cream. Slices of lamb rump, pink at the eye, came with grilled Little Gem lettuce with a Caesar dressing topped with hefty gratings of parmesan; a flaky borek, a savoury Turkish pastry, is filled with fennel and potato and sits atop a celeriac cream. Thought had gone into each of these dishes, the main thought being: these people need to be fed.

So to dessert, a particular strength. There is a frothy blackberry parfait on an apple compote, sheltering within a wigwam of thin, friable meringue. A paving-thick hunk of dark chocolate cremeaux is surrounded by spirals of orange caramel, and topped with a cardamom cream, which in turn lies beneath a fennel seed-flavoured crisp. I may have got these ingredients in the wrong order. No worries. Once they meet on your spoon they get along joyously. Then there is the lemon posset. There are a lot of very lovely things atop the set cream: a toasted meringue turban worthy of Elizabeth Taylor in her dotage, and a raspberry coulis dotted with fresh fruit. But best and most eye-widening of all is a basil sorbet. It is difficult to get the balance of floral, sweet and acidity right in a herb sorbet. McLeish gets it bang on. Plus, it’s a gorgeous shade of green. I’d love to sit in a room painted that colour.

This lunchtime, the room has filled quickly. It’s easy to see why. Moonfish Café is a civilised place to be. The service is efficient and unobtrusive. The wine list, though short, is thoughtful and almost all of it is available by the glass. Bring that together with the kitchen’s marked skill and good taste and you have what even the late John Henry Anderson, lying in his grave across the way, would, I’m sure, have recognised as a certain kind of magic.