

# FLAVOUR HUNTER

DISPATCHES FROM THE FOODIE FRONTIER. EDITED BY TABITHA JOYCE

## THE PLATE SPINNERS

INNOVATIVE CHEFS ARE COOKING UP IMMERSIVE ESCAPES WITH THEIR HYPERLOCAL DESTINATION RESTAURANTS-WITH-ROOMS



CRIOLO IN OAXACA, MEXICO

## FLAVOUR HUNTER



Clockwise from top: pomelo fruit, gaznate sweets filled with almond-thyme cream; tamal with tomato, Luis Arellano at work, all at Criollo

## CRIOLLO, OAXACA, MEXICO

A SLICK STAY FROM THE COUNTRY'S TOP KITCHEN TEAM

Pujol in Mexico City is the capital's most coveted booking, so when chef-owner Enrique Olvera announced the opening of a second restaurant in Oaxaca in 2016, fans were curious to see how he would interpret the region's local flavours. Since then, Olvera and his former 'head of creativity' Luis Arellano have been dishing up an inventive tasting menu that draws largely on indigenous ingredients. Exceptional plates putting a twist on traditional classics include a single *tamal* stuffed with a cow's milk cheese in a *mole* sauce that takes a minimum of 10 hours to prepare and a Mesoamerican *atole* soup, made from a corn- and *masa*-based purée, that is packed with crunchy sunflower seeds and zinging with lime. Chefs roast and toast at a giant flat griddle as guests eat. Four years on, and with the help of architect Javier Sánchez who also designed the restaurant, Olvera has now launched one of the smartest addresses in the city, Casa Criollo. Check-in happens in a slightly disorienting former office space behind the kitchen, but that only reinforces the fact that staying overnight is really an extension of the dining experience. The house itself has a vibe that perhaps only a restaurateur would create: a carafe of mezcal next to a sofa, with tunes by Mexican singer Javier Solís streaming softly via the sound system; a selection of freshly ground coffee and snacks – pineapple rubbed in spices, crispy *buñuelos*, a compote of Oaxacan berries – on a table by the small but elegant pool. Breakfast is served on the terrace and, like Criollo's menu, changes daily – *huevos a la mexicana* or fruit, yogurt and granola might be followed by *sopes* cake. Mezcal tastings, cooking classes and rooftop yoga can all be arranged.

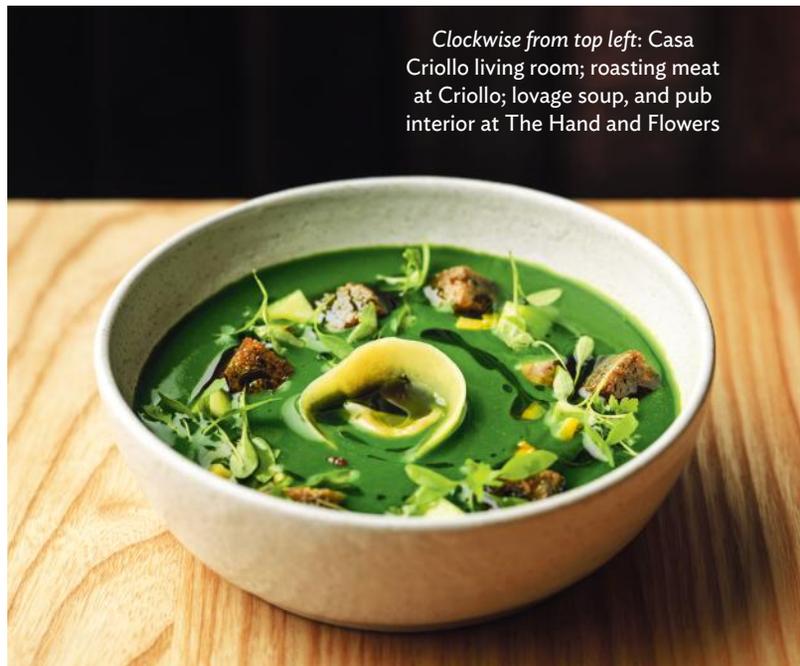
Once again, Olvera is ahead of the game. OLIVIA VILLANTI  
**IF YOU ONLY TRY ONE THING** Guacamole with added purslane, *chepiche* and *quintonil* herbs – both delightfully familiar and entirely new. Five-course tasting menu, about £40 per person; Casa Criollo, from about £510 per night (sleeps four). [criollo.mx](http://criollo.mx)

## THE HAND AND FLOWERS, MARLOW, UK

TAKING THE QUINTESSENTIAL PUB TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Kitted out with Chesterfield sofas and antique trunks, the bar here is full of locals drinking pints of ale, as well as out-of-towners (more likely to be sipping sparkling wine from Sussex) every night of the week. Having previously cooked in a handful of London's fine-dining spots including Bellamy's, Tom Kerridge opened his first solo venture on the site of a local boozer of the same name with his wife Beth in 2005. Look up and you'll spot a Michelin Man tucked into a beam in the ceiling. It's the only pub in the UK to hold two Michelin stars, winning the first within a year of opening. Bedrooms, added much later, are unconventionally not upstairs but dotted across three cottages, with a driver to ferry visitors to and from the restaurant. And while they are sweet, with roll-top baths and home-made lavender pillow spray, it's the pub you've come for. The ceilings here are so low that tall diners have to duck under them, the wooden furniture is worn and there isn't a tablecloth in sight. First up is a bucket of crispy whitebait with Marie Rose sauce. Slices of thick-cut bread fried in beef dripping are rich but cut through by mustard butter, brown sauce, griddled gem lettuce and a fried quail's egg. A fillet of beef is topped with onion rings and served with chips that look like cylindrical cheesy Wotsits. Back in your room there's a hamper filled with hot malted milk and whoopie-pie biscuits – two dark-chocolate cookies sandwiched together with a butter cream. Kerridge has succeeded in creating an unpretentious menu while ramping things up a notch at an established village classic. TABITHA JOYCE

**IF YOU ONLY TRY ONE THING** The smoked-haddock omelette served in a cast-iron skillet, light as a soufflé but oozing with Parmesan. About £180 for two; doubles from £240. [thehandandflowers.co.uk](http://thehandandflowers.co.uk)



*Clockwise from top left: Casa Criollo living room; roasting meat at Criollo; lovage soup, and pub interior at The Hand and Flowers*

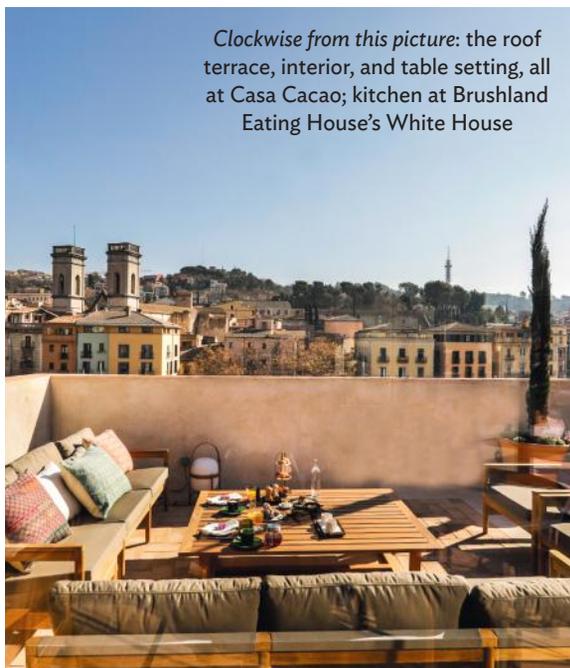
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Clockwise from above: cornfields near Bovina, The Owl's Nest cabin, daily specials board, storage from the garden, and exterior, all at Brushland Eating House



Clockwise from this picture: the roof terrace, interior, and table setting, all at Casa Cacao; kitchen at Brushland Eating House's White House



## BRUSHLAND EATING HOUSE, NEW YORK STATE, USA

### OFF-GRID LIVING AND INVENTIVE COMFORT CLASSICS

'This restaurant could be called "What Sara and Sohail Want to Eat All the Time",' owner Sara Zandi says with a laugh as she tries to describe the plates she and husband Sohail serve. The pair have singlehandedly transformed a creaky 1880s mansard house, a mile marker in the otherwise nondescript western Catskills town of Bovina, into a hotspot for forward-thinking New American cooking.

So what exactly do they – and everyone else – want to eat? The deceptively simple menu stalwarts have plenty of depth and soul: whole roasted carrots on sweet, slightly glutinous spoonfuls of raw honey-almond-garlic paste; the only kale salad you'll ever want to eat again, tossed in a creamy, salty dressing and topped with grated Beemster cheese and chunks of hazelnut. For pudding, the olive-oil cake – which in summer arrives with a swipe of ricotta icing and sliced, fresh-from-the-orchard peaches – is subtly flavoured. The couple have experience in knowing what makes a good dish: they landed here after leaving jobs at Brooklyn sister restaurants Frankie's and Prime Meats in 2014, with a one-year stint on Martha's Vineyard in between. But it's not only the cooking that makes a trip here memorable. They have applied the same formula – comfort with a kick – to their four hickster Airbnbs. In The White House, a three-bedroom homestead across the street, low, wide windows let a soft breeze into the living room where guests can help themselves to a bottle of a spritz local red from the cash-box-operated bar cart. A truly wholesome hangout. **BETSY BLUMENTHAL**

**IF YOU ONLY TRY ONE THING** The impossibly thin pork schnitzel with blistered onion and strips of courgette, both brushed in buttermilk. *Weekly barbecue (until regular menu returns) about £40 for two; doubles from about £140. brushlandeatinghouse.com*

## CASA CACAO, GIRONA, SPAIN

### A CHOCOLATE-BASED CONCEPT FROM A REVERED CLAN

Jordi Roca is the youngest of the three brothers behind the unceasingly innovative El Celler de Can Roca. But he never really saw himself joining the business and reluctantly waited tables at the restaurant until pastry chef Damian Allsop took him under his wing. Chocolate quickly became his passion, and with it the dream of opening a place of his own. Roca and Allsop spent three years exploring the traditions of indigenous communities in South America, researching and testing new ideas. Now, in a sleek gallery-style space in Girona's busy Mercadal neighbourhood, six chocolate origins are blended with goat's and sheep's milk to create bars wrapped in textured shades of cream, or churned to make colourful apple and thyme truffles. Beyond the shelves is a glass-fronted factory with giant bonbon moulds and molten chocolate in gleaming vats. And this is still a family affair – Anna Payet, the wife of Jordi's older brother Joan, had also longed to open a hotel.

So above the café are 15 rooms decked out in wood and marble, and there's a sunny terrace with lavender, rosemary and bougainvillea where seasonal set breakfasts devised by Joan are served. Black truffle, asparagus, Ibérico ham and creamy sheep's cheese make up a series of tasting plates, followed by cups of silky goat's-milk hot chocolate and pain au chocolat sprinkled with cacao nibs. While one aim with the hotel was to provide guests of El Celler with a place to stay, another was to introduce people to the city's lo-fi gastronomic scene. Come suppertime, anyone who doesn't have a booking at the restaurant half an hour's stroll away can head up to the roof for cold cuts and vermouth. Jordi completes the Roca circle with this project while adding some new flavours of his own. **LAUREN HILL**

**IF YOU ONLY TRY ONE THING** The chocolate-filled *xuixo*, a riff on a local deep-fried, sugar-coated pastry usually made with *crema catalana*. *El Celler de Can Roca tasting menu, about £170 per person; doubles from about £220, including set-menu breakfast. casacacaogirona.com*



PHOTOGRAPHS: CHRISTIAN HARDER; JOSEP OLIVA; JOAN PUJOL

## CASA CAMINADA, GRAUBUNDEN, SWITZERLAND

AN ELEGANT HIDEOUT DELIVERING ALPINE HITS

Castles and five-star palace hotels are endemic in this part of Switzerland, home to high-rolling Davos, St Moritz and Klosters. But only one has three Michelin stars, and it's not up a mountain but hidden deep in the Rhine Valley: Schloss Schauenstein, a small wedding cake of a château close to the Italian border. New last year were the additions of chef Andreas Caminada's casual *beizli* pub and a nine-room guesthouse in the revamped stables. If Schloss Schauenstein is the aristocratic Habsburg grandmother who spoiled everyone with delicate continental flavours, this is the resourceful mountain granny who cooked sensible food made with her own hardscrabble and love. Milan-based Patricia Urquiola managed the refurb, bringing a minimalist Heidi-meets-Marie-Kondo aesthetic to the stone structure. Pared-back bedrooms have sliding glass doors that open onto terraces overlooking the garden. Swiss hikers and oenophiles arrive to explore the cellars of neighbouring wine region Bündner Herrschaft, known for its Pinot Noir grapes warmed by the southerly winds blowing up from the Mediterranean. Instead of fondue there are seasonal comfort classics such as creamy hay-milk cheese, *maluns*, crumb-like *spätzle* made with shredded potatoes, and cold pickled trout with red-beetroot carpaccio and briny capers. A volcanic-stone oven is fuelled with spruce wood to bake rustic loaves, walnut tortes and dense pear-bread made with fruit plucked from old gnarled trees spilling over the castle gate, while the breakfast spread includes honey from bees kept on the property. There are several paths nearby for walking it all off – the nine-mile Domleschg historic trail passes eight monuments. This is seriously elevated mountain cooking. ADAM H GRAHAM

**IF YOU ONLY TRY ONE THING** The raw probiotic butter, mixed with yogurt, from a cheesemaker in the nearby village of Andeer. About £120 for two; doubles from about £200. [casacaminada.com](http://casacaminada.com)

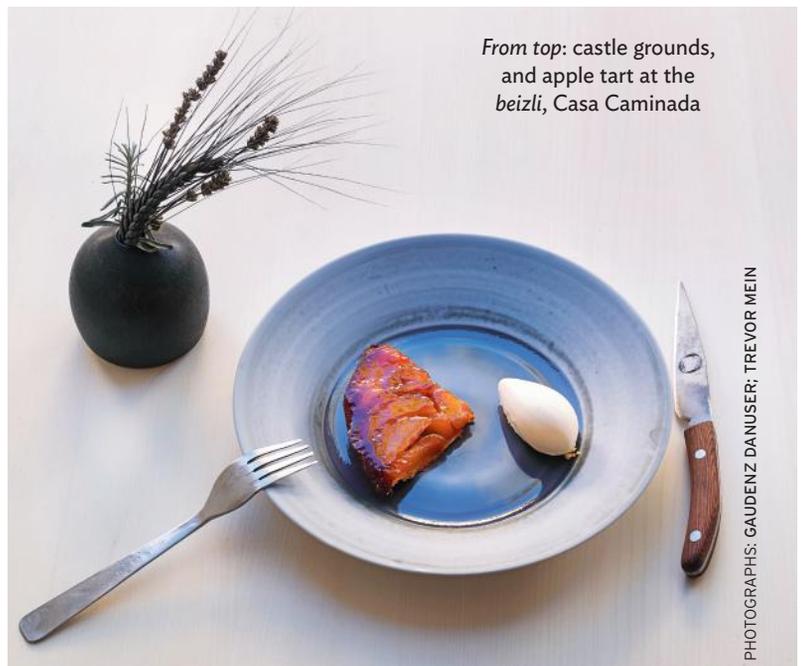
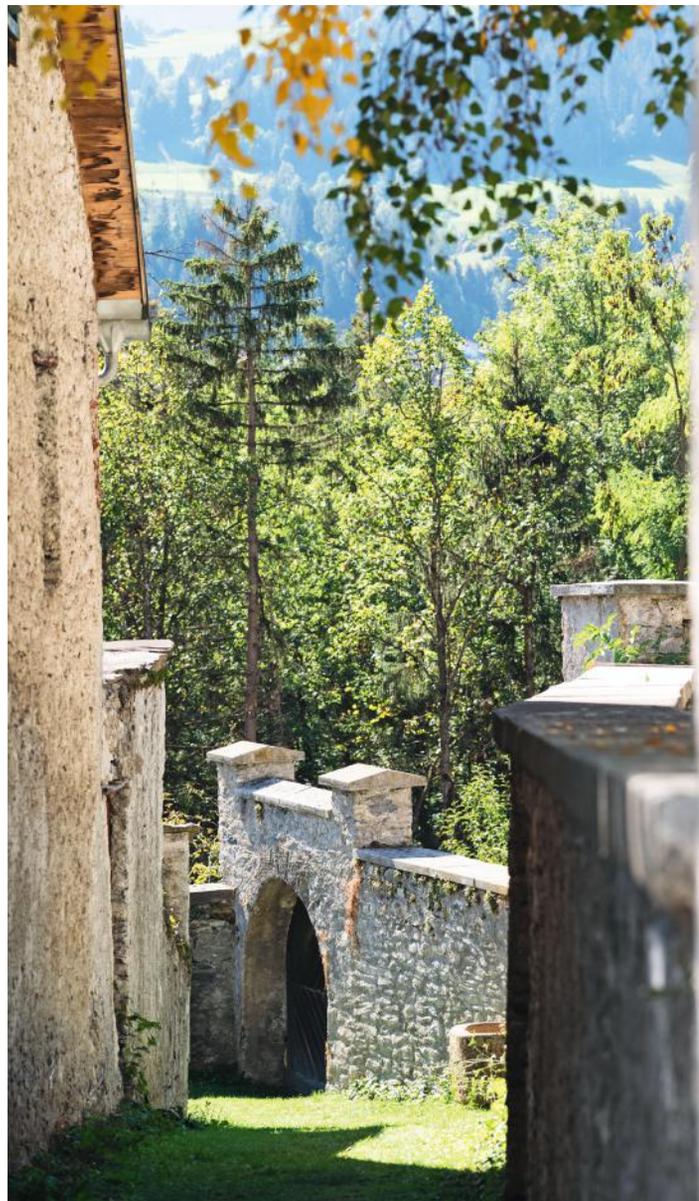
## BRAE, VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA

REFINED COMBINATIONS IN A FARMHOUSE SETTING

An hour-and-a half from Melbourne and surrounded by rows of perfectly neat plots of kohlrabi and carrots, this off-grid building is unassuming from the outside. Inside, it has all the telltale signs of a restaurant that's consistently ranked among the best in the country. White-clothed tables are dotted around, conversations are respectfully hushed and service is impeccably civilised. It's owned and run by Dan Hunter, who was at the helm of lauded Mugaritz in Spain, and there's no menu as such – instead, a dozen nibbly courses of surprising, innovative dishes appear: yellowbelly flounder served with native warrigals and finger limes; a prawn head wrapped in nasturtium leaf that looks like a delicate taco, accompanied by a yolky, soup-like truffle sauce. Afterwards, it's just a short waddle to the large timber- and steel-clad bedrooms. With only six on the property, space is not an issue but a booking might be. Each was designed with a stripped-back mix of wood and exposed brick, and feels very much like a relaxing hangout in which to reflect on the kitchen fireworks. There's a bath with views of the rolling hills, thoughtful bottles of pre-measured spirits for stir-your-own Manhattans and Negronis, and an excellent wine selection. In the morning, find a simple brown-paper breakfast bag hanging outside the door, containing wood-fired sourdough, granola with biodynamic yogurt, plum and rhubarb pastries, and preserves from fruit harvested in the grounds. A special-occasion spot for dedicated foodies. CHLOE SACHDEV

**IF YOU ONLY TRY ONE THING** The iced oyster, a shell filled with oyster- and sea-lettuce ice cream, which takes 12 hours to prepare, presented on a bed of smooth sea stones.

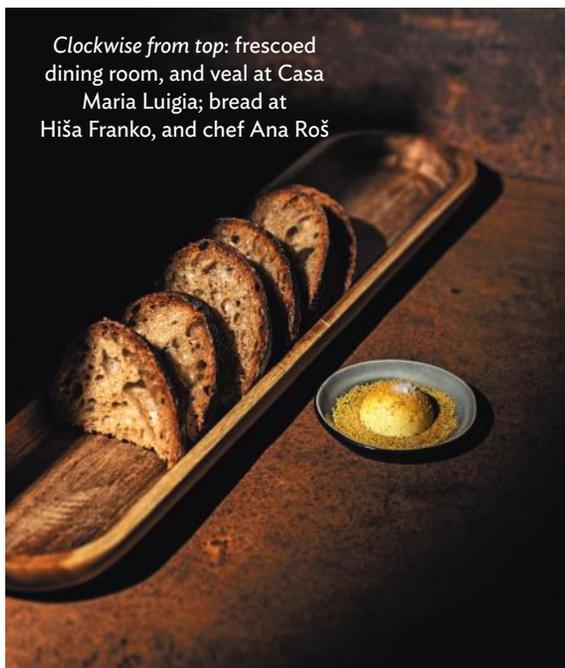
Tasting menu, about £160 per person; doubles from about £400 (with restaurant reservation only). [braerestaurant.com](http://braerestaurant.com)



From top: castle grounds, and apple tart at the *beizli*, Casa Caminada



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Clockwise from top: frescoed dining room, and veal at Casa Maria Luigia; bread at Hiša Franko, and chef Ana Roš

## CASA MARIA LUIGIA, MODENA, ITALY

THE ULTIMATE SUPPER CLUB BY A RENOWNED MAESTRO

Modena is a city of slow food and fast cars: keen cooks visit to stock up on balsamic vinegar, while adrenalin junkies make a pit-stop to pay homage to race-car brands Ferrari, Lamborghini and Maserati. But it is Massimo Bottura who firmly put the town on the map with his Osteria Francescana, twice voted best restaurant in the world. Now there's a new route to the experience, and it's just a 15-minute drive away.

'We wanted to show what Osteria Francescana with 12 rooms looked like,' explains Bottura's wife and business partner Lara Gilmore. The 18th-century villa stands at the end of a poplar-lined driveway surrounded by 12 acres of parkland. Inside, vaulted ceilings offset the couple's remarkable art collection, which includes an Ai Weiwei triptych. Bedrooms contain a mix of vintage finds and contemporary pieces, with half-bottles of Lambrusco and 32-month-aged Parmigiano Reggiano. Choose from vegetarian snacks and bergamot juice in the fridge – a Maria Luigia cookbook is in the works – or put on a Charlie Parker tune in the vinyl room. The carriage house serves as the breakfast space: there's paper-thin mortadella, warm *zabaione* and *frittata* with garden vegetables. At night, art connoisseurs and food enthusiasts dine at communal oak tables next to Damien Hirst's *The Last Supper*. The open space works as a stage, with kitchen staff swiftly arranging the nine courses and Bottura delivering stories. It's the chef's top hits, such as crunchy lasagne with five-hour-stewed ragù and veal with splashes of multicoloured sauces, that steal the show. Bottura's new mission is to eschew formality.

'We want our guests to break bread together,' he says. A clever way to try world-beating food without the waiting list. SARA MANUELLI

**IF YOU ONLY TRY ONE THING** The Five Ages of Parmigiano Reggiano, celebrating the cheese in various forms such as foam and demi-soufflé.

*Francescana at Maria Luigia tasting menu, about £280 per person; doubles from about £405. casamarialuigia.com*

## HISA FRANKO, SOCA VALLEY, SLOVENIA

FRESH TWISTS ON A LESSER-KNOWN TRADITION

There has been an inn here, at the foothills of the Slovenian Alps, for generations. What was once a family-run B&B changed tack when the owners handed the restaurant over to their sommelier son, Valter Kramar. His young wife, Ana Roš, stepped into the kitchen with no formal training, and while the first few years were a self-described disaster (we doubt it), she slowly found her style. Working with super-local ingredients – 'everything on the menu can be seen from the top of the mountain' – Roš has managed to introduce this practically unknown regional cooking tradition with no fine-dining heritage to a global audience. But those expecting a buttoned-up supper will be surprised: Roš herself can often be found with a glass of wine in the garden, and waiters wear trainers and utilitarian aprons. There are snacks of golden lamb's brain *beignets* and teeny plantago tacos; barely cooked amberjack sits in a no-waste salami broth made from leftover smoked meat, while aubergine is combined with a peanut-chocolate emulsion and fermented cheese. Upstairs, past the family dog who snoozes next to precarious stacks of books, are 10 bedrooms. Added almost as an afterthought, they provide a comfortable space for diners to tumble into bed after a five-hour eating marathon. A breakfast of freshly baked bread, bitter-chocolate cookies and compotes is served on the mountain-backed terrace. Before leaving the valley, pay a visit to casual sister restaurant Hiša Polonka in the neighbouring village, with stone walls, home-brewed beer and a hearty menu that give it the feel of a proper pub. A duo that's well worth making the pilgrimage for. SARAH JAMES

**IF YOU ONLY TRY ONE THING** The standout roebuck – soft and sweet, and served with tart horseradish triple cream.

*Eleven-course tasting menu, about £160 per person; doubles from about £135. hisafranko.com*