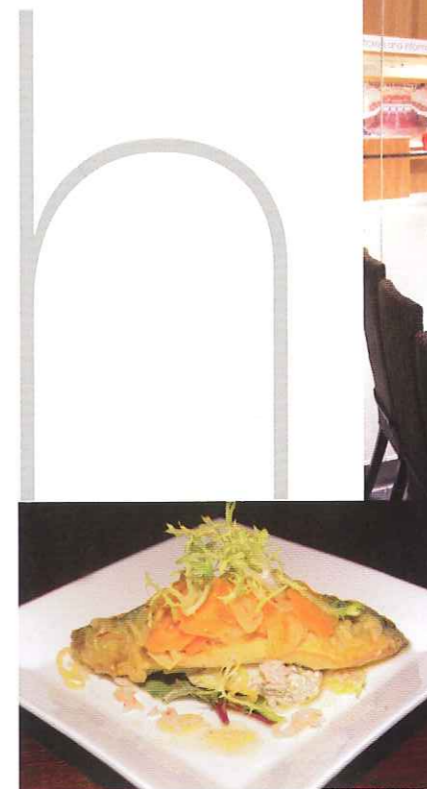
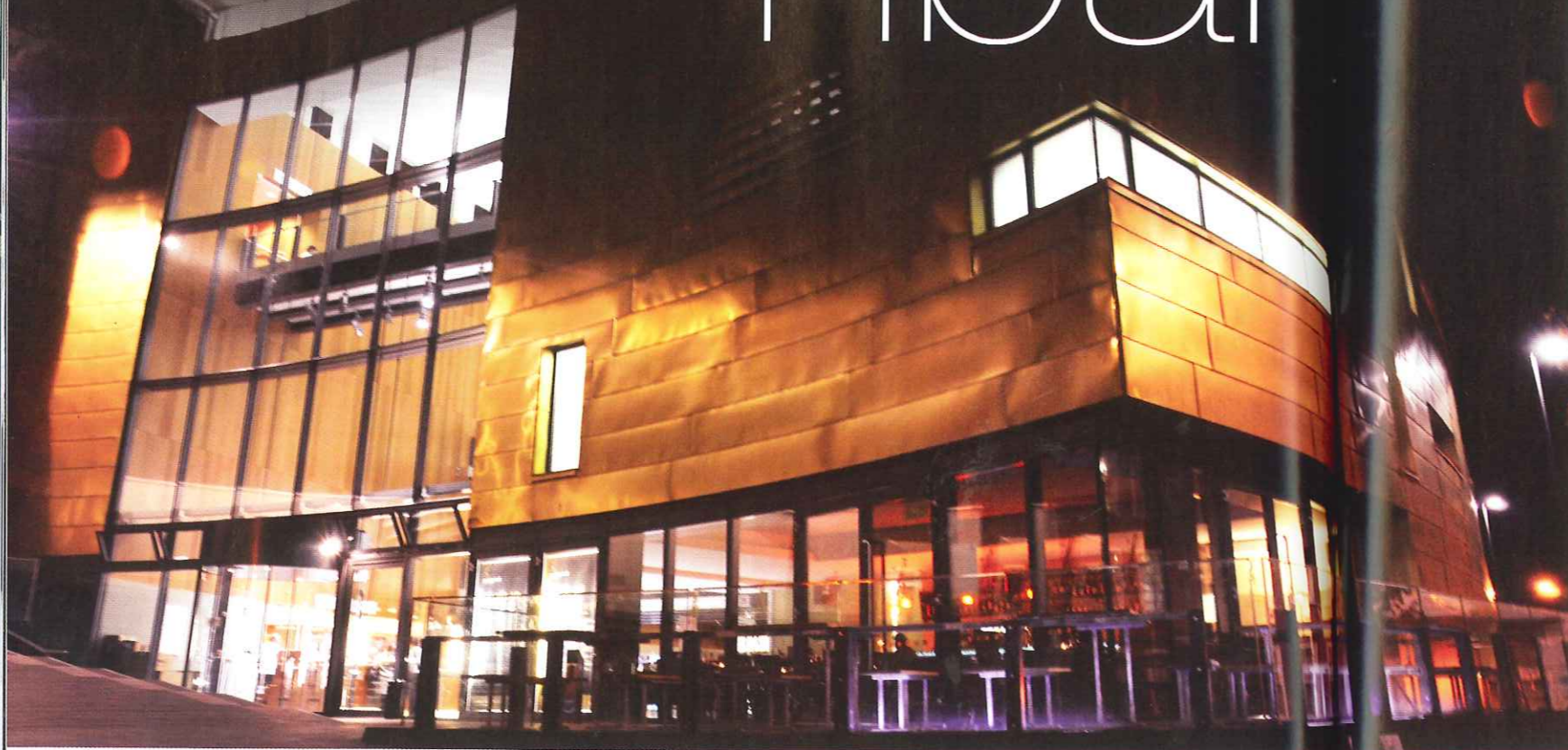


As Colston Hall unveils its sparkling new foyer, **Lucie Wood** is one of the first to pick up a knife and fork at H Bar Bistro...

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Floor-to-ceiling glass windows, a glow bar, and tea-lights flickering on each table - it may only have been the second day of trading but The H Bar Bistro in the newly opened, £20 million Colston Hall foyer looked very much the part. Swanky and in the thick of the action, it has the feel of the capital's Southbank and as if to prove the point, Bristol hero and jazzman Andy Sheppard and his entourage were merrily dining next to us. It has been a long road, however, for Bocabar's Humberto Benevenuto who, somewhat heroically himself, beat off competition from 40 other restaurants to open here, including other South West big hitters The Glass Boat and Mud Dock.

You can see why his venture for the bistro, and its sister bar serving tapas on the ground floor, was chosen - it's fresh, funky but swanky too. For those who have eaten at Benevenuto's now-closed Bocanova restaurant, the menu is not as Latin American as you might expect. With an Italian mother and Brazilian father,

“ This classy but unpretentious bistro at affordable prices is what Bristol has been waiting for. Go before the secret is out. ”

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Benevenuto has instead concocted a menu steeped in flavours of the Mediterranean with South American touch here and there.

For example, a starter of mackerel escabeche (£5.95) - the poached fish is marinated in a vinegar mixture overnight - was a superbly different dish that brought together the cold, oily juicy flesh of the fish with sweet carrot, creamy new potato salad and a sprinkling of delicate crab meat. An endive, walnut and apple salad with Stichelton and cider vinaigrette (£5.25) was perhaps not the best test of the kitchen's cooking but it was certainly testament to its superior sourcing. A dish like this is reliant on top quality ingredients and they all delivered.

We had eaten our way through the entire bread basket (Herbert's with Luque olive oil and balsamic vinegar, £2.50) before we saw anymore of head chef Danielle Coomb's cooking. Coombs has been behind the stoves at Hotel Du Vin and

clearly has all guns blazing. A roast rump of lamb (£13.50) was presented in slices, tender with enough fat to give it flavour with the, fairly exotic, combo of cherry tomatoes, spiced aubergine, pesto and sweet balsamic jus.

A fillet of black bream (£12.50) was beautifully cooked with crispy skin but the pairing with braised fennel was slightly lack lustre. Nevertheless, the smoked garlic sauce saved the day. This isn't forgetting the well-constructed wine list where it's possible to roam by glass from a peachy, floral Argentinean white to a deep, velvety Italian red.

To finish, a chocolate truffle torte (£5.95) that showcased some

impossibly thin pastry and a perfect balance of bitter-sweet chocolate, and a spiced plum zabaglione (£5.95) that I can still taste now; the cosseting creamy vanilla and the tart, zingy fruit were thoughtfully presented in a terracotta pot.

It's this kind of attention to detail that should ensure H Bar's glittering future. This classy but unpretentious bistro at affordable prices is what Bristol has been waiting for. Go before the secret is out. ■

