

Fairy Tale Feast
THE FAT DUCK RESTAURANT MAKES KIDS OF US ALL.

**IT'S LIKE FALLING DOWN
THE RABBIT HOLE IN
*ALICE IN WONDERLAND.***

ANGELA DANSBY

Once upon a time, there was an old English pub turned three-star Michelin restaurant in a quaint village outside of London. Giant cutlery hanging above the front door signaled its presence. Just inside was a hologram fireplace, foreshadowing a culinary experience created from childhood memories and dreams.

This is the beginning of an extraordinary "bedtime story" at The Fat Duck restaurant in Bray, England, created by chef Heston Blumenthal. Drawing upon his favorite childhood holiday memories, Blumenthal takes you on a journey from the day before vacation to a full day by the sea and in the forest.

"We're doing things that other places can't," says Jonny Lake, executive head chef of The Fat Duck Group. "Imagination is a huge part of it—where anything is possible—plus curiosity and playfulness."

In fact, the whole experience is a fantasy. It's like falling down the rabbit hole in *Alice in Wonderland*. A giant magnifying glass helps you read very fine print about each dish on a fold-out menu and map that acts as an itinerary for the imaginary trip. A golden light ball above the table denotes the time of day and ambience for each course.

The first chapter of your culinary story begins the "night before vacation" with liquid-nitrogen-poached "cocktails" (infused frozen egg-white mousse) that burst with different liquors inside your mouth. A "change of air" follows with a beetroot and horseradish macaron. Then "just the tonic you need" to start your vacation comes in the form of botanicals, artichoke ice cream, smoked-cumin custard, and pickled vegetables.

The following course represents the "next day" (the actual holiday), beginning with tea or coffee and a full English breakfast in a bowl. The "milk" is smoked bacon cream sitting on top of truffle-egg custard and roasted tomato jelly. Once you've finished this morning meal, it's time to hit the beach.

While listening to the sound of the seaside via headphones connected

to a conch shell, you'll now consume "sand" (tapioca with miso oil), cured fish, and sea plants. And of course, no visit to the shore is complete without popsicles—in this case, sweet and savory. After the popsicles melt in your mouth, you stumble into a "rock pool" of smoked caviar, trout roe, crab, and white chocolate—melted by a splash of hot mussel-infused sauce.

Next, you head into a thick forest, which you see, smell, and taste via truffle-laden "moss," pickled beetroot bites, and more. A "picnic" follows with mock turtle soup created from a gold leaf "watch" (think Alice's white rabbit) stuffed with a beef stock that dissolves in hot water. There's a vegetarian "turtle egg" in the center surrounded by diced ox tongue. The soup is served with a gourmet version of Queen Victoria's toast sandwich, including bone marrow, anchovies, and black truffles.

A formal dinner follows—like Blumenthal used to experience on vacation with his parents—featuring an appetizer, entree, and dessert. For example, you start with scallop roe and sea buckthorn, move to lamb with coffee, and finish with noble-rot-affected "grapes." Dinner is capped off with a flight of whiskies in the form of gumdrops peeled off a map of Scotland.

All of this glorious food starts to make you sleepy. A little pillow is brought over, levitating a few inches above a cloudlike platter playing a lullaby. A tiny pillow made of malted meringue and milk ice cream is on top of the real pillow. Following that are soft, white frozen desserts and sponge cake that will make you count sheep.

Then you see a miniature sweet shop machine with a replica of Blumenthal's childhood bedroom. Tiny drawers full of various candies are activated when you place a token in the machine. Out spits a bag of gourmet sweets. Are you dreaming?

After about four hours of this multisensory, gastronomic fantasy, your stomach tells you it's real. You sip on locally roasted coffee to wake up and emerge from the rabbit hole giddy, wondering why you ever had to grow up. ●

