

Your Table is Ready



JEFF GILBERT

Through a glass, darkly

When I hear about the opening of another brand new, destined-to-be-cool-and-trendy gastronomic destination, my heart hits the floor. Next to be vaporized is my very soul, as I am confronted with the accompanying bumf that some terminal optimist or other is presumably paid to write.

And so to Jar Kitchen, just opened in Covent Garden. Of their food and their persona, they have this to say: "Not only is it darned tasty, it's down to earth – just like us."

I swear I did not insert that "darned": it's theirs. This is bolstered by a further "message to foodies": "From our passion for sustainability to our big food lovin', we think you'll fit right in."

Reader, I didn't fit right in. I stuck right out. And what might all this "big food lovin'" be, then? Well, better find out, I suppose.

The frontage in Drury Lane is black, flat and defiantly plain. So, very cutely, is the tiny interior. Old dull floor, counter and shelves thrown together from scaffolding planks, scrubbed wooden tables and chairs, black walls, white tiles where the mandatory open kitchen is winking out at us, and loads of old jars. Why jars? Because it's called Jar Kitchen, stupid – a testament, I imagine, to the said passion for sustainability: because they haven't thrown

them all into the bin, like sane people do. Instead a fistful of no doubt locally sourced weeds are rammed into a Kilner jar on your table. More of the pesky things dangle above your head, each containing the ubiquitous industrial light bulb, which cleverly sheds no light.

Water comes in those frog-mouthed carafes in which Eighties American wineries used to flog their toxic wares, and you drink it from a bloody jam jar with screw-top striations at the lip. And there we have it: if they'd called the place Box Kitchen, you'd be sucking the stuff out of a crate. The cost of kitting out the whole place must easily have run to more than 20 quid, while the young, smiley and well-meaning people who run it are so laid-back as to be in the maw of an only-just-arrested headlong collapse: it is as if we have all just survived an apocalypse, and are gamely coping with whatever bits of debris could be salvaged, while gubbrin energetically throughout. All aimed at the young – yes, I do know that, because there is a deep irony at work here: in the name of enjoyment the young are eager to queue endlessly to sit on a plank in a foetid garage and eat food of the profoundest mediocrity, while in everyday life being more or less incapable of putting up with anything at all.

"We're having trouble with the door," said a happy waitress. "It

won't shut, so there's a draught, but we're getting a new one on Monday." Yes, well – I couldn't hang around until Monday, so my wife and I hunkered down on hard chairs and scanned the menu. Five starters, five mains and three puds. Six white wines (including "Sex, Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll Riesling", which I found so very riotously amusing that I vowed to split my sides as soon as I had a moment). Five reds – from which we had a soupy sangiovese – and, astonishingly, no beer for people to casually

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swig in a down-to-earth manner. I assume because they didn't call the place Bottle Kitchen. My wife's mushroom and goat's cheese tart was not a tart, but rather a slab of warm cheese on top of a sliver of flat flaky pastry. Here is our old friend deconstruction – wholly self-conscious and damnably annoying. But she enjoyed it – the yield of cheese, the meatiness of mushrooms. My starter was ham and pea croquettes: three crusty balls, each atop a blob of aioli: creamy beneath the crunch

but very underpowered, with no taste of ham whatever.

While we were waiting for the mains, it became clear that we seemed to be the only people present who weren't related to or friends of the owners. Babies, brothers, chums... we felt like gatecrashers at a happy-go-lucky, come-as-you-are student squat.

My wife was having mixed-grain salad with roasted heirloom carrots, coconut yogurt, pomegranate and herbs with the optional add-on of braised lamb shoulder. I'd ordered "house made" tagliatelle with braised beef, mushrooms, kale and "JK ricotta". (I can only presume that the prefix JK was intended to denote home-made status – though it wasn't applied to the tagliatelle – rather than the guiding hand of the woman who authored the Harry Potter books.)

The slow-cooked beef was good, with a deepish flavour, but the pasta was claggy, overcooked and not plentiful enough to allow for proper twirling. Random lumps of ricotta added precisely nothing. My wife's salad she thought rather breakfasty, featuring quite a lot of what seemed to her to be muesli; she said the lamb tasted of offal. Maybe there was offal in it; maybe it was just mutton dressed as lamb. If it's not very nice, it doesn't really matter, does it? Both dishes were the sort of thing you would have eagerly devoured following a lengthy fast,

had they been rustled up from leftovers by impoverished friends upon whom you had descended without notice.

Then we were told that the power in the kitchen had failed, so pudding would take a while. Downstairs, outside the single lavatory that serves the whole restaurant, a man was arm-deep into an open drain: not really the day they wanted a restaurant critic to come calling.

Power or not, don't ask me why a chocolate ganache and a pear and apple crumble took 25 minutes. The ganache was good and silky, though much too cold (clearly the fridge had been the last thing to go). The accompanying banana ice cream, though, had dissolved into a murky puddle of some Farrow & Ball shade. The crumble was all right, and no more.

And then their printer packed up, and it took two of them 12 minutes to hand-write the bill. So look: if you are a little mad and actually like the sound of Jar Kitchen, where you deliciously imagine you're in for some big food lovin', you'd better get yourself down there before the whole place just simply falls over, or else slowly sinks back into Drury Lane's primordial slime.

● To buy Joseph Connolly's latest novel, *STYLE* (Quercus, rrp £20) for £16.99 plus p&p call 0844 871 1515 or visit books.telegraph.co.uk

This week: **Joseph Connolly can't contain his impatience with Jar Kitchen, London WC2**

CRATING 3/10

176 Drury Lane, London WC2B 5QF
020 7405 4255;
jarkitchen.com
Three courses with wine: £40-£45 per head

Pinttopint

Our ale almanac crosses the border to reach **The Old Black Lion, Hay-on-Wye, Powys**

There is a melancholy about forgotten frontiers, borderlines that history or empire have all but erased. From Trieste in north-eastern Italy, a bus or ferry ride brings you to what used to be the Iron Curtain. The checkpoints are deserted concrete shells; you just stroll through, a little surprised to go unchallenged. Yet the markers of difference remain: casinos, duty-free shops, strip clubs, all tottering towards redundancy as the quant notion of a boundary between different cultures on opposite sides of the vanished threshold fades away.

Hay-on-Wye, or Y Gelli to give it its Welsh name, is one of the few places in the UK where a national boundary is physical and immediate, something a bit more objective than whizzing past a sign on the motorway. The Dulas Brook, a tributary of the Wye, has carved a steep gully to the east of the town; a hundred yards or so back on the Welsh side, the castle rises brusquely. With a half-decent catapult they could have rained all kinds of flaming righteousness down on the *Saesneg*, you think. And hard by the castle, snug and old and white, sits the Old Black Lion.

In fact, Hay isn't just a naturally fortified Welsh border town; it's a polis, part of an international confederacy of autonomous statelets, a town of books. Its streets, shops, stalls and – patience – pubs have that peculiar mix of the rustic and the cosmopolitan that you'll find in a hundred pretty country towns, with hedge-funders and sheep-farmers chatting uneasily about sport, politics and local gossip. There are walkers (Offa's Dyke runs close by) and tourists, here for the books, the kayaking, or both. Round the town you'll see what are unmistakably members of the book-dealing tribe: Tattersall check shirts, shiny cords, specs on a cord. A furtive, hurried air, like disgraced clerics. Years of book launches have bred a preference in this subspecies for wine over beer: it's no surprise that the ale offering in the Black Lion is less diverse than in some such places.

As to the pub, it's not so much a pub as a quintessence of pub, a kind of Platonic ideal of pubbishness or pubbitude. It is low and dark, like a cave, with timber posts near-black with age, scrubbed oak tables, wood-burning stoves, a soft pinky-brown effusion of dried hops above the bar.

Even when absent in person, the proprietor Dolan Leighton is represented by her portrait. There is a large, open area, and a small nichey part, and a separate, comfier snug; there is also a small and stark beer garden, from where you can look out across a field to the eastern flank of the valley, and on into another country.

Keith Miller

● Lion Street, Hay-on-Wye, Powys HR3 5AD (01497 820841; oldblacklion.co.uk)

HAY FESTIVAL.ORG
AFRICA AMERICAS ASIA EUROPE MIDDLE EAST

Something for the Weekend

Horses for courses, a cracking crab fest, bashful badgers and a beach café above Oxford Street – you heard it here first

What's on

Crustacean celebration
Cromer Crab & Lobster Festival, Norfolk; until tomorrow night
The crabs of Norfolk are the stuff of legend; the beaches of Norfolk aren't too shabby either. This 48-hour jamboree promises music, folklore, performance, demonstrations and seafood that'll be well worth (brace yourself) shelling out for.
● crabandlobsterfestival.co.uk

Inherit the Wind
CHI Royal Windsor Horse Show: Windsor castle, SL4 1NU; today and tomorrow
One of the grandest equestrian events in the calendar, with showjumping, dressage and endurance trials – and we're not talking about the queue for the bar – all in the shadow of Windsor castle.
● rwhs.co.uk

For those about to brock
Badger Watch: Dinefwr Park, Llandello, Carmarthenshire; Saturdays until end July, then Wednesdays and Saturdays until mid-August; 7-9pm; £8/£4/£22
Put on your "sensible footwear" (see panel, right) and follow a skilled Badgerwatch Ranger through the park to Dinefwr's hide. For best results we recommend you don't read Weekend's own Robin Page on the subject beforehand.
● 01558 824512/823902; dinefwr@nationaltrust.org.uk

Plain saline
Vintage Salt, Selfridge's, Oxford St, London W1, all summer
This summer's rooftop pop-up at Selfridge's is a seaside-themed, fish-heavy

restaurant, bar and café. Enjoy sunshine, fresh air and spectacular views, without having to worry about a seagull making off with your saveloy.
● selfridges.com

What's trending

Body and Seoul
This week, Mumsnetters are all over Korean beauty products. If you're not yet up to speed, the Koreans seem to take their skincare VERY seriously – and, according to Mumsnetters, lead the way in terribly technical, but remarkably affordable, gunk, gels and masks.

Top of the pops on MN is cult brand Mizon, despite an ingredients list to make the bravest beauty pioneer quail: their Snail Repair Cream contains yer actual snail secretion filtrate – and the brave sea creatures name-checked in their Returning Starfish Cream (especially good for rosacea sufferers and very dry skin) will not be returning anywhere soon. Over the Placenta Sheet Mask, Mumsnetters draw a polite veil.

Mizon's Good Night White Sleeping mask "is a serious piece of engineering – white gel-y stuff that plumps and seals the hydration in, without that horrid shrink-



Pincer movement: a lobster. Above, Windsor Castle



wrapped feel." Benton, Innisfree and CosRX are other brands to seek out – and if you're pale or acne-prone, Misha BB creams are a non-orange revelation, according to MNers. Time to brush up on your Korean – though, as one MNER remarked, not having an earthly what the instructions say is all part of the fun.
● mumsnet.com

Dare to bare

We're loving... United Nude
UN made its name with exquisite, often outlandish women's shoes by Rem Koolhaas (nephew of the illustrious Dutch architect, and UN co-founder along with the splendidly named Galahad Clark, scion of the great Quaker cobbling dynasty) and guest stars including the mighty Zaha Hadid. Slowly the men's range is catching up, with colourful trainers and boat shoes in hi-tech fabrics, and subtle (or not so subtle) updates on the classic desert boot.
● unitednude.com



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