

FOOD & DRINK

Turn left at the Cycle of Futility

This week: *Joseph Connolly* stumbles into a potato-free zone at Lyle's, London E1

What am I doing in Shoreditch? I haven't the slightest idea. The cabbie who took me here confided mournfully that it is a "very happening spot". So I have heard – but what exactly is happening? He sighed: nothing, he said, that will change your life. But before we get further into all this, a little bit of gloss concerning London Town: you may have heard tell that it is a series of villages. Well, this might easily have been true in the Dark Ages, or about a decade ago, but these days I think of it more as a series of continents, each with its own language, habits, street-cred and mores, all of which are carefully crafted to ensure that any stray interloper will feel as alien as possible. So my tootling down from Hampstead to Shoreditch, you see, is the approximate equivalent of a Yorkshireman taking a rocket to Pluto. And while it is as well to know these things, all I wanted to know about Shoreditch was: yes – but what's happening? Because, just maybe... it will change my life.

Lyle's is an almost disgustingly cool and newish eatery on what I am sure the local hipsters would love to term "the main drag". This would be Shoreditch High Street, then – the sort of place

that people will cough politely before telling you that it's "not very pretty". Ah, but I can go further: it is hideous and brutal almost beyond compare. Ceaseless traffic, ugly buildings, flyovers, scrubby shopfronts – all overlaid by an air of palpable cockiness, where you might more have expected a poignant desperation. The back streets, however, are something else: posh shops, "on-trend" cafés and extraordinarily accomplished graffiti – one colourful example being entitled "the cycle of futility", and incorporating policemen, skulls and spermatozoa. There is a pop-up mall called Box Park, made up of black-painted containers; all the outlets bearing names that groovily conceal any trace of whatever it is they might be selling: The Mooshop... Hymn... Dumdums... ah, well. And opposite that is Lyle's, hard by a branch of Dirty Burger. (A further mini-gloss: in the cutting-edge areas of London, food and particularly cocktails are frequently "dirty"; filth is the new frivolity.)

Through a vast and cobbled atrium – for we are in the old Liptons tea warehouse – we troled. Shall I describe the interior? I don't really have to, because you know what it's going to be: poured concrete floor, white wall tiles, faux-industrial metal pendant lamps, plain wood



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tables and chairs, an open stainless steel kitchen from which there throbs the boom-boom of might-be music solely for the benefit of the chefs... and a vast overhead panoply of exposed aluminium ducting and flues – something that Gerry Anderson might have pressed into service for Thunderbirds, after Dr No had grown tired of it. And in the loo, you actually pull the chain.

The other thing that strikes you is that it is forbidden to work or dine here unless you are sporting a full beard. A few women managed to slip under the wire, but not many.

The menu features eight starters, but only three mains: no set lunch, and pretty hefty prices. Service is tentative, polite and rather quietly proud.

My guest was having lambs' tongues, gherkin and yogurt, and I thought I could go for the smoked eel, radishes and onion. "The tongues," he said, "are

overdone. Decent flavour, but far too chewy." My pretty mean portion of eel was rather fine, as was a spoonful of broth and a silky onion purée. The radishes were fuchsia coloured and as briny as you can imagine, quite possibly from having been pickled in Pepto-Bismol. Then Dexter flank – Dexter being a weeny Irish cow... but it is the word "flank" that should detain us here: flank is skirt, or bavette. It is a cheap and difficult cut that – if not treated with extraordinary care (and preferably time) – can be a sinewy and pointless prospect. As it proved to be here, I'm afraid. My guest found the rare-to-raw serving (no choice was offered) only semi-edible, so ate just half to prove his point. Decent runner beans, which rarely quicken the pulse. The portion of flank (£16.50!) had been mercifully small – but not as small as my Aylesbury duck, matey: just one slice of breast with some charred baby carrots and charred baby other silly damn things.

Many the all the young people here with their large, imploring eyes stay so pencil-slim by subsisting on a single slice of duck, and don't mind paying £17.30 for it. But I minded: I minded a lot. We both agreed we could do with some mash. Or chips. Or something. But here is a potato-free zone, so we had Neal's Yard cheese instead: stichelton – a great unpasteurised cheese, more or less Stilton – and Baron Bigod (not an angry imprecation from Robin Hood, but a good English "Camembert"). This cheese, the eel and our Italian wine proved to be the stars.

Blackcurrants with ice cream was as it sounds, though the ice cream tasted only of air and coldness.

So what was I doing in Shoreditch...? I still haven't the slightest idea – but at least now we all know what was "happening". As to my life... it remains unchanged.

Tea Building, 56 Shoreditch High St, London E1 6JJ: 020 3011 5911; lyleslondon.com
Dinner menu £44; three-course à la carte lunch with wine about £40

OUR RATING
5/10

It is forbidden to work or dine here unless you are sporting a full beard



Pint to pint

Our guide to the best British pubs. This week: *The Spring Inn*, Lancs

Several lifetimes ago, a couple of friends and I tried to get into the Spring Inn. The landlord genially suggested we should go forth and multiply – and come back when we were old enough. He was quite right: we were 15, and trying it on.

In those days the Spring Inn was a small, quiet country pub. A spring on the other side of the road fed a stone trough where horses used to drink before setting off with their carts up the steep hill beyond. Yes, horses and carts, the rag-and-bone man, the milkman and the occasional farmer. It was a long time ago.

Today, the pub is updated, expanded and modernised, and ticks a lot of boxes. You can drink at the bar, where there are hooks to hang your coat – I like that. There is an alcove, dressed up as a boardroom, with old cheques, invoices and letters on the wall, a vast restaurant in a conservatory at the back and acres of garden.

Best of all, there is the most palatial taproom I've ever seen, with a smart pool table and a splendid darts arena. If you look carefully here, you can see an old photograph of the pub as it was when I was so cruelly turned away.

The Middleton brewers JW Lees own the place, so their beers predominate. The vin de pays of the stable is Lees Bitter, 4 per cent abv, which has been made to the same recipe, with Goldings hops, since 1828, when the brewery was founded. These days, with the sixth generation of assorted Lees in charge, there are more beers from which to choose. I'm fond of MPA (Manchester Pale

Ale), 3.7 per cent, which is made with Liberty and Mount Hood hops and, therefore, has that biscuity taste.

The invention of MPA a couple of years ago is a bold attempt to stake claim to the cultural identity of Manchester, now that the city's iconic beer, Boddingtons bitter, is a pale, insipid shadow of its former self. "Boddies" used to be so ferociously hopped that it became a near-death experience for anyone trying it for the first time. MPA is the right colour, but not so fierce on the tonsils.

This was a typical English summer's day, with black low cloud, endless rain and November temperatures. You need comfort food and there is plenty of it. I go for pork and smoked bacon sausages and mash, with fresh garden peas, at £8. It arrives on a dazzling white plate the size of a washing-up bowl and is beautifully set out, like a Rembrandt still life. Best of all, there is a jug of flavoursome onion gravy, which turns out to be as good as, if not better than, mine.

Arthur Taylor

The Spring Inn, 83 Broad Lane, Rochdale, Lancashire OL16 4PR: 01706 633 529



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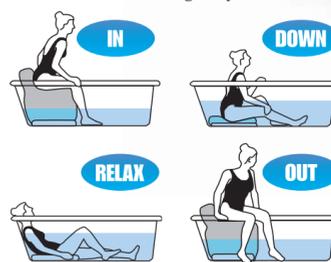
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