



THE DISH

Restaurant review: Marina O'Loughlin on St Leonards, Shoreditch

Table Talk: the ideal alchemy of heat and meat

Marina O'Loughlin

Sunday July 01 2018, 12.01am BST, The Sunday Times



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There are all manner of notable restaurants. There are the greats: fabled dining rooms, places of pilgrimage where people go to worship at the shrine of *haute cuisine*. There are restaurants of insane beauty — so

thrilling, you barely notice what's on the plate; restaurants as scenes, where simply being there is all that matters. Restaurants we seek out to be dazzled by the maverick creativity of the chef — who knew food could *do* that? — and restaurants where the perfection of a single dish is a life's work.

And then there's a subcategory I'm calling "ideal restaurants". These may not be up among the star-chasing greats, but they're always where I want to find myself. My ideals are scattered all over the globe: Joe Beef in Montreal, a charismatic celebration of exuberant cooking and occasional excess. The wonderfully outré Progress in San Francisco. Cibus in Ceglie Messapica, southern Italy, in its calm, white-painted former convent. London's Quality Chop House, Noble Rot (must attach the caveat "in which I have a minuscule interest") and St John Bread and Wine. And La Tupina in Bordeaux.

I immediately think of La Tupina when I walk into St Leonards, even though initially they couldn't be more different: the former a slightly chaotic, organic bistrot, its walls yellowed by decades of grill smoke; and this, a sleek, urban, almost austere beauty. The tables here are widely spaced, the colours a delicious subfusc of plaster and concrete and mild mustard. With its stainless steel surfaces and displays of cut logs for the baroque open grill that dominates one corner, fragrancng the space so you salivate like one of Pavlov's pooches, it's wonderfully butch. But the two restaurants share an ethos: a love for the primal beauty of heat on meat and a devotion to feeding us with generosity and warmth.

Each dish that arrives from the various sources — grill, raw bar, expansive kitchen — is, in one way or another, revelatory. Peak brilliance is a bravura riff on the Japanese savoury set custard chawanmushi, to whose depths foie gras adds lubricious meatiness; on top lie slivers of remarkably good, almost fondant-textured smoked eel and the porky, Quavery crunch of chicharrones. Man, you'd have to have some kind of warped imagination to come up with this little number. I suspect the hand of the co-owner (with Jackson Boxer) Andrew Clarke, an amiable, tattooed Viking of a man whose creativity I've long perved over. His work, like that of a contemporary artist, is rooted in classicism and technique, over which he basically goes a bit tonto.

So, Tamworth pork, after hours and hours of absorbing the smokiness of the grill, is dressed simply with splashes of rowanberry vinegar and garum (aka fish sauce), its fat silky, the

meat a caress. Potatoes breathe out the muskiness of fig leaves; broccoli is laced with an almost-too-pungent relish of ham knuckle and smoked chilli — kapow. Oysters are vivid with pickled garlic scapes, an inspired play on mignonette. Strips of pearly brill come topped with discs of virtually raw carabinero flesh and tiny leaves of purple basil; pooled around is butter, scarlet with the concentrated essence of the singular shellfish. Excellent bread dredged through this makes my pupils dilate with something approaching unspeakable lust. And I'm agog at the mad genius of charred margherita onions in "tuna bone caramel" — a dark, sticky reduction of the fish's bones, slow, slow-smoked over the grill till Guinness-rich, the onions' sugar adding sweetness.

Tiniest quibbles: perhaps desserts don't quite hit the heights of other dishes, but nuts to desserts — pass me the velvety plushness of their Noir de Bigorre ham. And a plea for menu clarity to head off potential splutters about, for example, £48 for a duck dish (the price can vary depending on size of bird). Perhaps a caveat — "feeds two to three", as many of the main dishes do. Mine, an exuberant tribute to the duck served at Allard in Paris, defeats two of us, even armed with the strongest desire to demolish every morsel of tender, succulent, crisp-fatted breast, gnawable legs, all perfumed with the caramelised bitterness of endive, the pungent, oily salt of many olives, the breeze of fresh mint.

I'm momentarily startled at the idea of £9 for a single cherrystone clam from the raw bar, before acknowledging that these extraordinary creatures cost three times as much as the finest oyster. And by the time the kitchen has anointed them with Sichuan-spiced oil and tiny green snippings of coriander

stalk — powerful flavours, but the sweet, meaty clam holds its own — it's a mouthful of utter luxury. As Boxer says when I query it: "Should we leave these exotic little clams to be semi-mythical playthings for places like Noma? We're not sure. We want to see." I'd say bring them the hell on. I'd rather have this short, sharp, intense pleasure than a couple of crappy Starbucks coffees anytime.

To my "ideal restaurants" list, I'm now adding St Leonards. It has all the hallmarks of a classic in the making. Boxer wrote to me: "I wanted people to feel time passing, get a sense of the time invested in making food taste good, from growing it on our farm, or ageing it in our meat cabinets, to cooking it slowly over seasoned wood. I wanted them to have a sense of time beyond the indecipherable rush of contemporary modern culture."

The two chefs have aced this already, and I can only look forward to what they do over the years. I confess to being a huge fan of Boxer and Clarke's other collaboration, Brunswick House in Vauxhall, so I fretted about weight of expectations. No need. After one visit, the pal says to me: "I'm still captivated by all the dishes I haven't had yet." Yes, yes, yes: this.

Twitter: [@MarinaOLoughlin](https://twitter.com/MarinaOLoughlin)

Instagram: [@marinagpoloughlin](https://www.instagram.com/marinagpoloughlin)

FROM THE MENU

Starters Margherita onions, tuna bone caramel £10; smoked eel and foie gras chawanmushi £13

Mains Duck and olives, allard style £48; Tamworth pork, rowanberry vinegar, garum £28

Sides Fig leaf baked potatoes £4; broccoli, ham knuckle, smoked chilli £4

Desserts Green Sichuan pepper pannacotta £6; rum baba £7

Drinks Damien Coquelet Beaujolais Villages £35

Total For two, including 12.5% service charge £175

St Leonards

70 Leonard Street, London EC2A 4QX; 020 7739 1291,
stleonards.london

A lot on her plate: three more things Marina ate last week