Affordable London newcomers

14 May 2010 by Nick Lander/FT

London is the richer for the recent openings of Caravan on Exmouth Market, conveniently close to Sadler's Wells Theatre, Pepito, a five minute walk east of King's Cross station, and The Towpath along the walkway of the Hackney section of the Regent's Canal.

Caravan, a restaurant, bar and roastery, also represents the life savings of four young New Zealanders. Pepito has its origins in its owner Richard Bigg's holiday home in Andalucía, Spain, while **The Towpath** serves the simple Tuscan food, cakes and coffee that American food writer Lori De Mori enjoyed while living in Italy before moving back to the house she shares with food photographer Jason Lowe on the other side of the canal. Each also offers outdoor seating, a huge boost to business during the summer.

Even the one large table at The Towpath that does have a roof is open to the elements on one side. That is part of its charm that has already induced many commuters, cyclists, runners, walkers and those who live and work nearby to call in to a set of unusual buildings they used to ignore.

That was before De Mori and Lowe became so intrigued by the three formerly shuttered metal and concrete bunkers that sit under an office building opposite their house and face directly on to the canal towpath that they bought them for £33,000.

One was leased to their daughter's partner for his cycle repair business. The middle one houses the principal table and a blackboard incongruously headed Finance Department. The third houses the kitchen, a display case full of delicious cakes and pastries made in De Mori's kitchen over the bridge by her talented chef, Laura Jackson, and two cooks who have to move in a synchronised fashion to avoid any mishaps in such a cramped space. It only works, De Mori stressed to me, if everything is ship shape.

From this tiny space emerges an array of home-made food from granola and porridge to toasted cheese sandwiches, bruschetta, stews, Florentine rice cakes, the most satisfying millionaire's shortbread and their own ginger beer, which allows them to stay open from 8 am to dusk. But in the three months that they have been open so far, when daily takings have ranged from a low of £89 when it rained non-stop to £3,500 on a sunny Sunday when they served over 800 oysters, De Mori has become an expert on the British weather. 'There's no barrier between us and the elements', she explained. 'When it rains all day I do wonder what we're doing here. When the sun shines and everyone stops, smiles and says hello, I couldn't be happier.' Below is a view of a particularly crowded Towpath on the day they celebrated its being granted a licence to serve wine with a special oyster tasting.

Neither the rain nor the fact that the kitchen at **Pepito** is even smaller than that at The Towpath will stop the fun at this, London's first sherry bar, which accommodates only 20 comfortably, 40 at a squeeze.

But Richard Bigg has converted this 30-square-metre site, formerly a dumping area for his much larger Spanish bar and restaurant Camino directly opposite the shared courtyard, with such style that it feels as though it has been there for far longer than since the middle of March.

Iberico hams hang from the ceiling; flights of sherries are offered on small blackboards on exposed brick; the tiled floor is from southern Spain; thick candles add romance; and whichever sections of the walls are not used for bottles of sherry or cases of Spanish wine display pictures of the vineyards that produced them as well as one atmospheric black and white photo of a particularly relaxed-looking Pablo Picasso, with a glass of sherry, naturally.

Pepito is a joint venture between Bigg the restaurateur and the company that imports Gonzalez Byass sherry into the UK, although the range of mouthwatering sherries is from far more numerous producers. The range of the food is catholic too with the more obvious plates of ham and cheeses, bowls of almonds and olives leading on to Devon crab with

paprika, smoked salt cod and venison carpaccio. Never has such a small and formerly unprepossessing space - Pepito's address in Varnishers Yard gives a clue to its light-industrial past - been converted into such an enjoyable and intimate setting.

The geographical ambit of **Caravan**'s kitchen is much, much wider but this newcomer has also achieved one other claim to fame since it opened in February - it is undoubtedly the capital's sweetest smelling restaurant.

This title it owes not so much to chef Miles Kirby's exciting cooking as to the fact that he and his front of house partner, Chris Ammermann, have installed a 12 kilo coffee roaster in the basement to conjure up the atmosphere of the relaxed cafes in their native New Zealand.

But it is also a clever commercial idea. From a simple wooden bar, made of former scaffolding planks that cost £5 each lain on top of one another, ace barista Neil Le Bihan conjures up excellent coffees that keep his section of the restaurant and the outdoor tables continually busy. Kirby's cooking, a relaxed but precise style of service and an excellent wine list also play their part.

Most important of all, however, is just how easy Caravan is to enjoy. The name arose out of a desire to express the culinary journeys the partners have taken. (Like all good names, no one can quite remember how it came about but each claims credit for it.) Kirby has reciprocated with a menu that reflects these easy-going associations. There is a copious breakfast menu; brunch at the weekends; and snacks, small and large plates. Memorable among the small plates have been goats' curd with tomato and lentils; avocado and chili flakes on toast; and salt and Sichuan pepper squid. Dinner comprised an excellent almond couscous with sumac yoghurt; a warm salad of duck, pear and walnuts; and a memorable orange-water blancmange with guava sorbet and pistachio as dessert.

The Towpath, 42 De Beauvoir Crescent, London N1 3SB. Closed Monday.

Pepito, www.camino.uk.com/pepito. Open Wednesday to Saturday from 5 pm to midnight.

Caravan, www.caravanonexmouth.co.uk. Closed Sunday evening.