Great food among the salvage

11 Nov 2011 by Nick Lander/FT WIP

An old friend, recently arrived in London from Sydney, Australia, was sitting comfortably on the leather-padded, high-backed bench in one of the restaurant's booths with a glass of Montlouis white wine in her hand and a smile on her face. 'This place is fantastic', she exclaimed.

And her view certainly was. There was a history lesson of chandeliers and lights hanging from the ceiling along with a whole sequence of flags. On the walls was a series of mirrors, small to very large; prints, paintings and the odd bust or three; and the tables and chairs that the rest of the customers were sitting on were as varied as the prints on the wall. On the stage at the far end of the room, a table for four had been laid up behind a red rope and behind that on the far wall were the three large letters **$€X** with red bulbs within them that had come from outside a Soho establishment. Welcome to dinner at the Brunswick House Café and one of the most memorable places to eat in London. (All photos courtesy of Rosie Hallam.)

I could in fact extend this to the world because lunch here could prove far more costly than lunch in any more expensive restaurant, or even more than dinner here, although their lunchtime menu is far more modest in price and range than their good-value dinner menu. But Brunswick House has been the home for the past 30 years to LASSCO, which its founder Adrian Amos accurately describes as London's prime resource for architectural antiques, salvage and curiosities.

It is these very particular items that furnish the floors, walls and ceilings of the Brunswick House Café and it is the obvious allure of so much of what is on display that could turn a visit here during the day into quite a costly affair. Because it is then that LASSCO's full range of wares, including cast-iron radiators, baths and toilet seats, old tube posters, trade posters, fireplaces, street signs, the odd mounted buffalo head and everything on display in the café, are available for purchase at several times any lunch bill.

While LASSCO occupies the three-storey Georgian building (built originally for the Duke of Brunswick in the 1770s) the café is located next door in a single-storey affair that was built around 1900 as meeting place, concert and lecture hall for the members of the local railway union. Hence the stage and the fact that the café boasts extremely good acoustics, even when full.

The café is the creation of Jackson Boxer (above left), 26, from a family whose interest in good food goes back at least two generations. His grandmother is Arabella, the esteemed cookery writer; his father Charlie runs Italo, the excellent grocery store in Bonnington Square a mile away; and his partner is brother Frank, who for the past couple of years has run the highly successful Frank's Café and Campari Bar as a pop-up in a car park in Peckham, south-east London.

I had eaten lunch several times here, once enviously eyeing one of the three vaulting horses from a school gymnasium that were part of the café's décor but have now been sold, but I was waiting for it to open in the evening once half the stage had been cut away to make way for a modest kitchen where chef Nick Balfe is in charge. This finally happened a month ago.

The menu is in keeping with the best, young British, relaxed approach to food. It is short, tersely written, comprehensive and fairly priced with no main course dish over £10. Because there were five of us and the other four's principal interest was catching up with each other's news, I ordered for the table, omitting the more mundane charcuterie and rare roast topside of beef, to leave 10 other dishes, a mixture of starters and small main courses.

These packed terrific flavours, including a strong venison and prune terrine alongside a more subtle dish of marinated mackerel with blackberries. There were four vegetable-based dishes - romanesco cauliflower with Berkswell cheese; beetroot, juniper and goat's curd; black kale and anchovy; and a macaroni cheese served inside half a squash. Finally, a hare and bacon pie alongside a bowl of spicy cuttlefish, chorizo and fino sherry. With very British desserts - quince and almond tart, lemon posset and a pear and chocolate pudding and three bottles of particularly well chosen and fairly priced wine - my bill was £206 without service.

But most impressive for me was to watch Boxer, slight and dressed in black, working the room, delivering stylish service accompanied by an enthusiastic team, having created a restaurant organically and with limited capital.

He initially approached Amos in the summer of 2010 to open the espresso bar from just the front part of the former concert hall backed by the £2,000 he had saved from tips working in various restaurants across London. This now serves the lunch menu from a blackboard and is the backdrop for two huge French signs, one 'Traiteur' the other 'A L'Escargot', several large French posters advertising liqueurs and a couple of metal traffic lights hoisted on to the door frame.

As business prospered, so did the range of what Boxer offered: hot items at lunch, such as a slow-cooked ham hock with beans; cocktail and wine lists; and, most importantly, the ability to fund from cash flow the fitting out of the kitchen and creating his vision of a restaurant.

The café brings with it for Amos and LASSCO not just more visitors and a new income stream, based on an agreed percentage of the café's sales, but also a genuinely integrated partnership as Boxer and his team now cater for private events in the main house's smoking room, parlour and library.

I am sure the Duke of Brunswick would have been amused.

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