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Bala Baya - the pluses and minuses of arches



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I first met Josh Katz and Eran Tibi about ten years ago. They were then extremely keen aspiring cooks and I was working as a consultant for the Roundhouse, the exciting music venue in Camden Town, north London.

I channelled their enthusiasm and abilities into making Made in Camden a success as a bar, café and restaurant and especially, given their Jewish background, a place for brunch at the weekend.

I then worked with them at JW3, the Jewish community centre on the Finchley Road, where they

opened Zest, a Middle Eastern-inspired café and restaurant for which they were both highly qualified.

Katz may have been born in north London but he had already spent his initial years, having forsaken a well-paid job in marketing, cooking in an Ottolenghi restaurant where he met Tibi.

Tibi, as his name would suggest, is Israeli and grew up in a home in Tel Aviv in which his mother taught him to cook while his father taught him how to bake bread.

Katz soon branched out on his own, achieving great and almost instantaneous success. Backed by his brother, who had retired very successfully from Goldman Sachs, he opened Berber and Q in Haggerston, east London, to put into practice the grilling techniques of the Middle East, from Morocco to the Lebanon. It is loud, serves excellent food and wine, and is great fun for those with less sensitive hearing.

Tibi stayed at JW3 considerably longer before he too finally succumbed to the challenges inherent in being not just a chef but also a restaurateur. Like Katz, and so many others today, the only space he could afford within striking distance of an interested market was a railway arch, with all the difficulties such a space involves.

The major problem railway arches present is that their interiors are highly permeable and, consequently, the landlord Network Rail prohibits the fitting of anything structural to the inside walls. This presented Katz with less of a problem as his arch has a relatively low ceiling but for Tibi, the arch he had set his heart on in Old Union Yard Arches, London SE1, was extremely high and, to make matters even more difficult, Tibi's business plan would work only if a mezzanine were to be added to provide the necessary extra seating.

Enter Afroditi Krassa, the Greek-born designer of many of London's current favourite restaurants such as Dishoom and The Perfectionist's Café. Obviously a practised listener (Tibi is an inveterate talker), Krassa has interpreted his vision to remarkably good effect. His vision, to create a space that recalls Tel Aviv in a mid-nineteenth-century London environment, has been achieved with shades of the Bauhaus movement, a lot of white paint and the same amount of stainless steel.

On the ground floor is an open kitchen, with counter seating opposite, a bakery at the back where their pitta bread is baked, and a busy bar. This is the only part that is only open for lunch although there is now outside seating too.

The upper floor is more atmospheric but considerably louder, a combination of the music, on what seems to be the highest volume possible, the resonating brickwork, and the chatter from 40 other diners. That the only surfaces, other than the brickwork, are metal, including an extraordinary chandelier in the shape of an upside-down palm tree hanging from the ceiling, only amplifies the noise.

While our lunch on the ground floor of pitta bread stuffed with slow roast beef and a vibrant aubergine salad was authentically Israeli in inspiration, it was possibly a little too sedate to be entirely reminiscent of Tel Aviv. Dinner upstairs was a far more lively affair.

We began with a dish billed as 'pockets of semolina', two dumplings filled with meat served in a paprika broth, with chilli and cardamom, and a dish simply described as 'squid delicious', pieces of spiced squid served with sweetcorn mayonnaise and a coriander relish.

This was followed by two dishes that were as lively to eat as their descriptions were to read. First came a dish highlighted as 'crispy, sticky, crunchy' pieces of chicken fried in a light, clean batter served with thin slices of bitter orange, the Moroccan spicy paste harissa and kimchi, the staple of Korean cooking. (Tibi's culinary mission is to show that Israeli cooking, and particularly that of Tel Aviv, is more than that of just the Middle East.) Here he succeeded, as with a dish written up as 'harissa and maple cured salmon', the fish enlivened with pieces of sharon fruit and bitter lemon. With two thoroughly Israeli desserts – a malabi, a rather too heavily set milk pudding with pomegranate seeds, and a dish described as 'The Filthy', an even stickier interpretation of a trifle – as well as a bottle of Athanasiou Assyrtiko 2015, dinner for three came to £140.

Bala Baya apparently means 'mistress of the house' but it was, overall, a feminine touch that the restaurant arguably lacks. This was particularly obvious upstairs, an area to which all the food and wine, as well as the cocktails and coffee, have to be run up by waiters who, only too frequently, leave the room unattended.

These issues could, and should, be easily soluble. But already a once-unprepossessing railway arch makes an exciting, if surprising, home for Eran Tibi's version of modern Israeli cooking.

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