



Written by
Nick Lander
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Lorne - a local restaurant for wine lovers



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My seat at a table for two at Lorne restaurant, close to Victoria station, provided me with a constant and close-up view of the duties and responsibilities of restaurateur (and ex sommelier) Katie Exton.

She seemed to be in state of constant motion. From greeting her guests; to showing three different tables their (identical) selection of a bottle of Corbières (second cheapest on the list); to taking the food order from several tables; to carrying plates up from the downstairs kitchen; to carefully opening a bottle of red wine; to bringing several tables their bill; and, finally, to somehow managing to be by the front door to wish everyone leaving a very warm 'good night'.

Despite all this, she seems to wear a permanent smile. She apparently takes great pleasure in ensuring that you, the customer, are feeling comfortable. 'The most important thing I tell all my staff is that they have to show the customer that they are on their side from the moment they walk in the door', she explained to me.

To this must be added her personal charm and the fact that at 5'8" (173 cm) she carries a certain natural authority.

Then there is her professional pedigree of almost 10 years working at some of London's most admired restaurants. There were her seven years as a sommelier at [Chez Bruce](#) in Wandsworth; a stint at its then sister restaurant [The Square](#), where she met her chef and business partner Peter Hall; and then finally a stint at the [River Café](#), a restaurant which with so many women in charge, gave her the self-confidence to branch out on her own.

Together, Hall and Exton have just completed the most challenging year in any restaurant's calendar; they have just celebrated the restaurant's first birthday.

Victoria used to be an area derided by those interested in eating out for being dominated by mid-market chains rather than independents, but Exton was convinced it would prove an excellent location for what they had in mind and has obviously been proven right (see [Victoria gets a facelift](#)).

She explained its advantages. 'My background has been in wine and I know of many wine companies that are based in south-west London, which would be an initial support. And our ambition for the restaurant has always been that it should be a local restaurant, but one based within the setting of central London.'

This worthy ambition was easier to articulate than to execute. It took them both over three years, with many hours spent putting flyers through letterboxes, before they found a landlord who was prepared to take a risk on them, a couple without any track record. But finally and fortunately they found their current landlord, who owns another restaurant nearby.

Half a million pounds later, capital raised principally from five friends and the builders who were given 'sweat equity', Lorne (Exton found the slightly puzzling name from a map of Victoria, Australia, apparently) took the place of its predecessor, an Indian restaurant called Spicy World.

But in settling on a location and a building they could afford, Exton and Hall had to accept one particular disadvantage of the layout. While the ground floor could accommodate the 40 covers that would make the arithmetic work, everything else, including the kitchen, would have to be located in the basement down a steep flight of stairs. This obviously posed a big challenge to Hall and his team, as well as extra labour costs. But it is far from uncommon in central London and they seem to have embraced the potential obstacles. A menu that changes every month concentrates on dishes that are complete, without side dishes or sauces that have to be added.

At my first meal there recently I was impressed by both courses. Initially it was a first course of brown shrimps, mussels, smoked cream, fennel and lovage where what seemed like myriad ingredients (the menu lists every one) blended together harmoniously. Then there was the power and generosity of my main course, four slices of veal with red cabbage, apple, punterelle and sage.

It was over this meal that a friend commented on the perfect temperature at which our bottle of red wine was served, all too rare in busy restaurants. On our return, our choice from their

single-bottle list of a 2009 Barbaresco Serraboella from Cigliuti (£80) was served at precisely the same, suitably refreshing temperature.

This was alongside equally distinctive food. A starter of a crisp fillet of mackerel on a potato salad with a brown crab sauce and slices of chicken skin and a main course of duck, duck liver, beetroot, rhubarb and turnip were followed by a rhum baba refreshed with slices of blood orange and mint. (My bill for two came to £169.88, of which half was the wine.)

Exton and Hall seem, unsurprisingly, happy with Lorne, their restaurant that at this point is trading strongly and profitably. But Exton is more than delighted with one other consequence.

'It is when we hear from some of our regulars that Lorne is their favourite restaurant that I feel especially proud. Londoners are spoilt for choice when it comes to restaurants so that whenever I hear this comment, it makes me realise that of we have achieved something. It makes all the hard work worthwhile.'

Lorne Restaurant 76 Wilton Road, London SW1V 1DE; tel 020 3327 0210