

Food & drink

Jay Rayner on restaurants

Brunswick House: restaurant review

Part architectural salvage, part urban gyratory, Brunswick House in London's Vauxhall is filled with unexpected treasures

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Jay Rayner

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Antiques roadshow: the handsome 18th-century Brunswick House. Photograph: Katherine Anne Rose for the Observer

Brunswick House, 30 Wandsworth Road, London SW8 (020 7720 2926). Meal for two, including drinks and service: £65-£100

It takes enormous amounts of hard work to seem effortless. There's the dancer who can appear to hold in the air for a quarter of a second longer than is strictly decent, as if the rules of gravity don't quite apply to them as to others; there's the jazz pianist whose blurred fingers pick the perfect pattern from one end of the keyboard to the other; or the painter who can drop a line on to the canvas which is the very essence of the sitter's profile, with barely a flick of the wrist. They do not break sweat while doing so for one reason and one reason only: they did all their sweating elsewhere. They practised and practised again so that, when the moment came, you couldn't see their workings in the margins.

There is a lot of that effortlessness in **Brunswick House**, the restaurant in Vauxhall run by chef Jackson Boxer, both in the food and the sense of place. I am probably now meant to apologise for not having eaten in the place before - it has been there a few years now - but as a south Londoner I think I can be excused. The 18th-century house it calls home sits on the roundabout at Vauxhall, an urban abscess which can rarely be a Brixtonite's destination. I view the roundabout as an obstacle to be negotiated, a carousel only there to throw you out over Vauxhall Bridge into the big city beyond or down along the Embankment. Certainly the handsome building sits proud and unlikely among the deformed and Viagra-ed apartment blocks that have been seeded here at the once-unfashionable edge of the Thames.

Brunswick House, all brick and portico and history, is now in the care of Lassco, an architectural salvage company, which has filled one of the high windows looking out over the roundabout with the sheen of glorious copper pans. They could stand as a come-hither for all those looking to be well fed. Inside the restaurant side of the business, the decor has not so much been designed as assembled. There are old rugs, bare wooden tables, a few booths made from red-leather banquettes pushed into place and, dangling from the ceiling, myriad old chandeliers which stop you noticing the polystyrene tiles above. It works in much the same way the food does. Things appear thrown together randomly but make an awful lot of sense when they find their way into each other's company.



'Sharply dressed': pumpkin - both in sweet roasted hunks and thin curls - with pear and black radish. Photograph: Katherine Anne Rose for the Observer

One is obliged to note the chef's foodie lineage: Boxer's grandmother **Arabella** is one of the greats of postwar British food writing; that his father Charlie runs an excellent deli; and that with his brother Frank he has been involved with a bunch of food enterprises, often in unlikely places, which have made waves of various frequencies. The original Rita's in Dalston, for example, may have been a little knowing for my tastes, but his fried chicken sandwich was a truly beautiful thing.

Much more interesting than the accident of his birth are the places where he trained. He is part of that generation of cooks who was nurtured in the comforting shadow of **Fergus Henderson** of St John and his wife, Margot. He started as a pot washer for Margot before making his way to Great Queen Street, a redoubt of St John alumni, and has described Fergus's dish of roast bone marrow with parsley salad as one of the things that made him want a life in restaurants. From this we can assume that he has both taste and a sense of what matters, all shared with recently arrived head chef **Andrew Clarke**, who has time on his CV at the Anchor and Hope in Waterloo, another St John progeny.



'It makes you feel the pig has been taken seriously': the pork terrine with cabbage. Photograph: Katherine Anne Rose for the Observer

And yet for all that nose-to-tail St John heritage, a lunchtime menu - £16 for two courses, £19 for three - displays an ambivalence towards things with a pulse. There is meat, but it is not front and centre. A dish of pumpkin, both in thinly sliced curls and sweet roasted hunks, comes with slices of crisp black radish and pear. There is a thick smear of nutty brown butter across the bottom of the plate, though each ingredient on top of it has been sharply dressed, too, and then the whole sprinkled with toasted pumpkin seeds. Another dish of lightly grilled and funky squid makes a point of the thrilling bitterness in slices of blood orange and the deep-green leaf of puntarelle, with texture added by a rye crumb. Neither of these dishes is obvious; like those dangling chandeliers, they make sense because someone with good taste has been involved in putting them there.

A thick slab of pork terrine, served with a prune and grain mustard paste and a little pickled red cabbage, is one of those examples of the craft which makes you feel the pig has been taken seriously. In a main course there are slices of roasted lamb loin, pink inside, the fat amber and crisp, but they are not at the centre of the plate. It is decorated first with a bright chilli relish and then, across that, a yogurt dressing, as if that other Jackson - Mr Pollock - has visited the kitchen. Then come heaps of purple sprouting broccoli and the meat, and the soft purr of happy people. Cylinders of sweet-salty confited salsify come with sticky roasted Jerusalem artichokes split open so you can see their butter-soft inwards, leaves of black cabbage, and across that curling savoury tuiles with the delicacy of antimacassars, made of toasted and salty Oglesfield cheese.



The big cheese: Stichelton with chicory and walnuts for dessert. Photograph: Katherine Anne Rose for the Observer

There are side dishes of pink fir potatoes, cooked in their skins, with marjoram and garlic, and another of sprout tops. Dessert is a set yogurt with a layer of blood orange and pecans, or a plate of Stichelton with chicory and walnuts. The lunch is extremely good value, though in the evenings, when the choice expands, starters are around the £7 mark, with mains in the low to mid-teens, which still feels keen. The wine list is, like many of those following in the footsteps of Fergus Henderson and St John, French-heavy, with a particular interest in Burgundy and the south-west, and good choice below £30.

Obviously my job is to analyse and describe, to focus on detail, and I have. But what's striking is just how bloody civilised it all is - this is a restaurant which all but forces your elbows on to the tables. Yes, I have passed this corner of London many, many times. Finally I have found a good reason to stop.

Jay's news bites






■ Stevie Parle has launched other ventures since he set up the Dock Kitchen in a furniture showroom in Ladbroke Grove. But his original, a glass box above the canal, is still going strong. Menus change regularly. But in general there is wanderlust in the kitchen, a love of vegetables and robust spicing. A recent menu included hummus with octopus and za'atar, and beetroot and pistachio pilaf with labneh (dockkitchen.co.uk).

■ Congratulations to Stephen Harris, chef-proprietor of the Sportsman near Whitstable, which has been named gastro pub of the year for the second year running. The number two and three spots in the Top 50 list went to Yorkshire pubs, the Pipe and Glass at Beverley, and the Star Inn at Harome (thesportsmansalder.co.uk).

■ The single biggest seller in Britain of curries - or approximations of them - is now JD Wetherspoon, according to a survey by the *Financial Times*. On Thursday nights every branch offers a curry, side and drink for £10. This is a warning, not advice (jdwetherspoon.com).

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