

Dock Kitchen is a pop-up that's staying put

By Fay Maschler, Evening Standard 15.10.09

The blurring of boundaries is what makes pop-up restaurants appealing. "I won't have to do this day after day," thinks the chef. "I am not so much a customer, more like a generous friend," thinks the punter. Observing cooks at work on a whim is part of the enjoyment and so, presumably, is that snuggly feeling of being just so in the know. Bootleg restaurants don't pop up in The Good Food Guide.

Moveable Kitchen, created by Stevie Parle and Joseph Trivelli, both chefs who have worked and, I think, still work at The River Café, is an "underground" project that was part of The Dock exhibition held at Portobello Dock in September.

Described as an "emporium of creative talent instigated by Tom Dixon", the context was the urban regeneration scheme beside the Grand Union Canal where Ladbroke Grove meets Harrow Road.

Thomasina Miers, of Masterchef and Wahaca fame, tipped me off that Stevie and Joe's Dock Kitchen has now become a permanent fixture — well, as permanent as anything is in this pop-up world — open for breakfast, lunch, weekend brunch and on Thursday evenings for themed dinners. Thomasina is looking forward to working there one day a week. Maybe then there will be a Mexican Thursday night.

Happily, she gave me this info early last week so I was able to fit in lunch on the Wednesday and go to the Sri Lankan set dinner on Thursday. Stevie apparently loves travelling in India.

I arranged to have lunch with my friend Joe, who specialises in being late. Fortunately, because he often goes for a run along the canal path, he found Dock Kitchen relatively easily and was able to come out from behind locked gates to talk me in on his mobile from where I was standing in the rain in Ladbroke Grove. Neither of us had stopped to buy wine so we went into The Western Arms in Kensal Road (a helpful landmark) to buy some. In this good-old, bad-old boozier redolent of pee and spilt beer, wine is sold in the sort of quarter bottles you get on airplanes.



We rang the bell for admittance but it was only thanks to a car leaving the courtyard that we were able to get in. You walk up metal stairs, cross a bridge over the canal and then you are in what is in effect an extension of Tom Dixon's showroom with concrete evidence in the shape of sleekly designed wooden tables and chairs, fluorescent resin stools and clusters of globe lights. Oranges and lemons is the colour scheme on the painted boards of the ceiling. A kitchen, hedged with produce, is at the heart of the space.

The menu graphics hospitably neglect to distinguish between first and main courses. We could just have eaten English sweetcorn off the cob deep-fried with smoked pepper flakes for £3 or a grilled kipper with black pepper (a migration from the breakfast menu) with buttery toast and the lunchtime addition of a roasted tomato for £8, but we wanted to make a meal of it and, particularly, not miss out on "fresh sausages we made ourselves" served with turnip tops and tomato.

The sweetcorn kernels, fried in an appealingly flimsy batter, were a cunning riposte to popcorn but even better was cauliflower and potato cooked slowly with yoghurt and north Indian spices served with a chapatti. The subtle assembly possessed all the virtues of Indian home cooking and I longed immediately to order it again but knew that brill with fresh coconut, curry leaves, south Indian spices, tomatoes and squash was on its way.

This too was a wholly successful, rather wonderful dish. As was spiced, grilled farmed French rabbit with Turkish walnut sauce (aka tarator), Swiss chard and lentils.

It is almost a relief to be able to quibble a bit and say that, as with most homemade sausages, the absence, or minimal presence, of any "filler" made them err on the side of dryness and stolidity. The turnip tops were astringently virtuous.

The spirit of pop-up allows desserts like "A big, ripe, yellow Italian peach" (£2.50) or "A few ripe Provençal black figs" (£4.50) or even "A new-season English Cox apple" (40p) but we wanted to experience cooking so ordered plum Bakewell tart with whipped cream and also chocolate and caramel ice cream. The tart was, without doubt, the best Bakewell tart I have eaten and if a meringue wash over the filling isn't traditional then it should be. "Incredible," said Joe. The chocolate ice cream was good, but a damson ice, which arrived unbidden, was better.

The Sri Lankan dinner was masterful — I asked for seconds (they were offered) of the fried sambal made with aubergine and dried sprats and the chana dal cooked with nine-spice mixture and curry leaves — and loved the cardamom milk, pepper and orange water ice served in metal beakers. But that was last week. For today the website www.themoveablekitchen.co.uk is musing tantalisingly about porcini, grouse and violini squash. It may be sold out, but you can be confident in booking for weeks ahead.



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