



THE DOODLE BAR

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33 Parkgate Road, Battersea, SW11 4NP

• 07866 629 908

• www.thedoodlebar.com

• Open Mon–Tues 11am–7pm, Wed–Thurs 11am–11pm, Fri–Sat 11am–midnight, closed Sun

• Transport Bus 19, 170, 49, 319, 345 or 15–20 min walk from Clapham Junction station or South Kensington tube

• Moderate



**Work
in progress**

Battersea isn't all second-class Sloanes and upmarket gastro-pubs. Behind Foster & Partners glossy offices on the banks of the Thames, a creative community has quietly taken over the warehouses between Battersea Bridge and Albert Bridge. But you'd never know it was there. To find the studios where fashion designer Vivienne Westwood and architect Will Alsop are based, you have to go down a dark alley and through a car park, guided by a neon sign cryptically proclaiming Testbed1.

This former Victorian dairy and tile emporium was going to be knocked down to make way for more "luxury riverside living", but luckily the 2008 financial crisis foiled that plan. Alsop, an inveterate *bon viveur*, convinced the landlord it would be a good idea to turn a vacant carpenter's workshop on the ground floor into a bar for local staff. Alsop painted the whole space white and created The Doodle Bar – a blank canvas where patrons could scribble and sketch over every surface, including the waiters. This pop-up space has now graduated into a grown-up bar, but doodling is still encouraged. There are jars of coloured chalk for anyone who wants to make their mark on the columns, radiators, bar and a blackboard wall. The chalkboards are wiped clean every few days, with the best doodles preserved for posterity on the website. With so many designers, animators and architects in residence, and the Royal College of Art's sculpture department nearby, the competition is stiff.

The improvised aesthetic extends to the sandblasted walls, industrial lights, and furniture made from recycled Balinese boats. On the hidden terrace overlooking Ransome's Dock, there's a ping-pong table and a blacked-out old banger. Occasional events include life-drawing classes, "sketch mobs", and Wednesday evening talks on the likes of taxidermy, edible architecture and underground London. Bigger and crazier happenings are staged at the adjacent Testbed1, a vast, raw "space with no agenda", punctuated by distressed metal girders and strips of coloured neon.

Eventually, Alsop plans to build a kitchen; for now, you can bring gourmet lunch boxes from Street Kitchen next door. From noon to 2pm, two award-winning chefs produce phenomenal seasonal dishes at street-food prices, using ingredients sourced directly from British farms. (Street Kitchen's Airstream trailer travels around the city dispensing lunch boxes – check <http://streetkitchen.co.uk> for details.)



INDIAN YMCA

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41 Fitzroy Square, Fitzrovia, W1T 6AQ

• 020 7387 0411

• www.indianymca.org

• Open Mon–Fri noon–2pm, 7–8.30pm, weekends and bank holidays
12.30–1.30pm, 7–8.30pm

• Transport Warren Street, Euston Square or Goadge Street tube

• Budget



*Curry
flavour*

Youth hostels aren't places I'd normally associate with good food. If YMCA brings to mind Village People rather than hot dinners, you'll be surprised by this odd little anachronism in central London.

Founded in 1920 to provide cheap accommodation and a safe haven for Indian students in London, the Indian YMCA has survived several incarnations. Originally housed in "Shakespeare Hut" opposite Senate House, in 1923 it relocated to a building in Gower Street that was badly bombed during the Second World War. One student lost his life. After a stint in Woburn Square and a dogged fund-raising campaign, new premises on Fitzroy Square were officially opened by the High Commissioner of India in 1953. Even Nehru came to give his blessing. In 1962, this became London's first mixed-sex youth hostel, a surprisingly racy move for such a conservative establishment.

In all other respects, the atmosphere at this charming time warp is comfortably institutional. In the cafeteria, impoverished students hunch over heaped plates of dirt-cheap curry alongside thrifty academics, office workers and Indian expats pining for a taste of home. Attentive staff in white jackets and hats chitchat with the regulars in Hindi. The room bears all the hallmarks of a canteen in any sub-continental backwater, right down to the Formica tables, beige curtains, neon lighting, and a washbasin for traditionalists who prefer to eschew cutlery.

Fine dining, this ain't. It's self-service. Vats of mutton, prawn, and chicken curry look fairly indistinguishable, but they're all tasty and freshly made. A mound of pilau rice, ferociously spiced cabbage and lentil curry, onion bhajis, and saucers of chutney and raita will set you back a fiver. Drinks are limited to mango lassi and jugs of tap water on every table. Ghee is used sparingly, so the food doesn't leave a greasy aftertaste despite the giant servings.

The cafeteria is open for just a few hours each day. There's a lunch-break rush around 1pm, so go earlier or later to be sure of a seat. It's not a place for a leisurely meal, but it's ideal for eating alone.

The rooms upstairs are a bargain too, although I'm not sure the lodgings will inspire the same enthusiasm as the restaurant. A pile of mattresses was wedged between the toilets and the coffee-dispensing machine on my last visit.



THE MAYOR OF SCAREDY CAT TOWN

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- 12–16 Artillery Lane, Spitalfields, E1 7LS
- 020 7078 9639
- www.themayorofscaredycattown.com
- Open Mon–Thurs 5pm–midnight (last entry 11pm), Fri, Sat noon–midnight, Sun noon–10.30pm
- Transport Liverpool Street tube/rail
- Moderate



**Ask
to see
The Mayor**

Every speakeasy in London claims to have been inspired by Please Don't Tell in New York's East Village, accessed via a vintage phone booth in a hot dog joint. The Mayor of Scaredy Cat Town doesn't pretend to be a speakeasy, but its entrance is equally unusual: through a white Smeg fridge inside the Spitalfields branch of The Breakfast Club.

Skip the queue for French toast and tell one of the staff you're here to see The Mayor. Beyond the fridge door is a dark staircase with a neon arrow flashing "Thrills". The small basement bar is a cosy, dimly lit nook of exposed brick and kitsch Americana. A stuffed moose head is draped in a lei; a pimped-up portrait of the Queen sports real sunglasses and rapper chains. A door signposted "the second smallest disco in the world" leads to the loos: a homage to the 1980s, plastered in a Smash Hits collage featuring Paul Young and Samantha Fox.

Apparently, the bar's name came from an episode of *Cheers*. The management have taken the branding a little too far by calling the bar snacks "Cat Food". The menu, stuffed into a cat food tin, is a catalogue of guilty pleasures – chilli cheese chips, buffalo wings and blue cheese – designed to appeal to people who've had too many of the delicious chilli and lemongrass margaritas. Other notable house cocktails are Rosie and Gin (Bombay Sapphire, pineapple juice, rosemary and lime) and Basil-no-Faulty (vodka, elderflower liqueur, fresh basil and lime). There's table service so you never have to fight for a refill. With a maximum capacity of 60, they don't take reservations except for brunch.

The weekend brunch menu (served until 4pm and groaningly dubbed "The Hair of the Cat") is especially appealing if you're recovering from the night before. Poached egg on toast with avocado, bacon, chilli hits the spot. An unlikely combination of pancakes with bacon, blueberries and maple syrup is strangely good. The biggest draw is the DIY Bloody Mary bar, with a choice of dozens of ingredients including bacon and pickled ginger mixed with homemade roasted cherry tomato juice.

Patrons are requested to exit through the Breakfast Club toilets rather than the fridge, although don't take the house rules too seriously: "Gentlemen, you are advised to leave your fly down to add to the charade. Ladies, if you'd leave your skirt in your knickers, it would be greatly appreciated."



UPSTAIRS BAR & RESTAURANT

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- 89b Acre Lane (entrance on Branksome Road), Brixton, SW2 5TN
- 020 7733 8855
 - www.upstairslondon.com
 - Open Tues–Sat from 6.30pm; kitchen closes 9.30pm Tues & Wed, 10.30pm Thurs–Sat; bar licensed until 1am Tues & Wed, 2am Thurs–Sat
 - Transport Brixton or Clapham North tube
 - Expensive



Dinner chez Philippe

With its inconspicuous entrance and intimate setting, Upstairs feels more like a supper club than a restaurant.

Hidden in Brixton's backstreets, there's no sign to alert passers-by to its existence, just an inconspicuous buzzer on a residential street. As the door opens onto a narrow, carpeted staircase, unadorned apart from a couple of pot plants, the sense that you're entering someone's flat is heightened. A diffident young waiter waits on the first-floor landing to take your coat and offer you a drink in the small, rather soulless bar. We skipped aperitifs and headed up to the equally small second-floor dining room. Despite the soft lounge music and candlelight, the space is fairly spartan – cream banquettes, plain white crockery, bare walls. Large windows overlook Acre Lane's unglamorous shops – Leway nails, Handyman's Corner, Nairobi hair salon – with Big Ben and Centrepoint glittering hazily in the distance.

The French owners, Philippe Castaing and Stephanie Mercier, also run the ground floor café, Opus. With only nine tables, the prix-fixe menu (which changes every two weeks) is suitably succinct: three choices per course, with one meat, fish and vegetarian option for the starter and main course. The tasting menu includes samples of most dishes, paired with wines. If the location is unlikely, the quality of the food is even more so. The laconic menu is misleading: each dish is an elaborate composition of surprising delicacy, containing several unexpected ingredients. "Goat cheese mousse and hazelnut sable" turned out to be a creamy dollop of tangy cheese on a crumbly hazelnut biscuit scattered with bitter radicchio, endive and preserved grapes and served with apricot bread. Sometimes the surprise is less welcome: if you're not partial to black pudding, you'd be horrified to discover that "lamb rump with hotpot potatoes" is served on a bed of blood sausage. The tender lamb was more satisfying than a bony little fillet of mackerel with sautéed and puréed Jerusalem artichokes, topped with a lemon foam and raw wild rice that didn't taste of much. Quince cake with kaffir lime and cardamom ice cream covered with crunchy filo flakes was an intriguing blend of sour, salty and sweet.

The almost comically French maitre d' described the composition of every dish in such a treacly accent that we had no idea what we were about to eat. But no matter: the subtle flavours spoke for themselves.



George Leybourne became an overnight sensation after his song “Champagne Charlie” was first performed at Wilton’s. Moët & Chandon bought him a townhouse in Mayfair and paid him to drive through Hyde Park daily, drinking champagne in a carriage drawn by six white horses. He died of liver failure aged 42.

WILTON’S MUSIC HALL

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- 1 Graces Alley, Wapping, E1 8JB
- 020 7702 2789
- www.wiltons.org.uk
- Open Mahogany Bar Mon–Fri 5–11pm. Guided tours 3pm and 6pm every Monday. Check the website for performance times
- Transport Tower Hill or Aldgate East tube
- Moderate



Sleeping beauty

Years ago, I went to Wilton’s Music Hall for a wedding party. Decadent and dilapidated, layers of paint peeling by candlelight, the building almost stole the show from the bride and groom. Wilton’s has a marriage licence now, so you can get hitched on the stage where knickerless girls once danced the can-can and performers ate live rats. This might not sound romantic, but Wilton’s is dead sexy.

The oldest surviving Grand Music Hall in the world, this “shrine of gentle music” opened in 1858. John Wilton converted five terraced houses in an alley near Wapping docks into a hidden auditorium for cabaret acts. The grand staircase was lined with hookers – “a better quality than the whores of Haymarket”, according to one Victorian visitor. Punters had to buy a refreshment voucher from the box office; the minimum order was two pints of stout and a pie. These days, patrons tuck into rum cocktails and takeaway noodles in the Mahogany Bar. Long since stripped of its mahogany fittings, the bar is a replica built for Guy Ritchie’s Sherlock Holmes remake, which was shot here. Even so, the room oozes faded glamour. There are free acoustic gigs in the bar every Monday night. The main hall hosts a mixed bag of magic shows, film screenings, ping-pong tournaments and cabaret acts.

The music hall’s heyday didn’t last long. With industrialisation, the area soon became more slum than sauce. Wilton’s giant chandelier with 27,000 pieces of crystal was sold off to cover running costs. The place closed in 1880. After trying to shut it down for years, the local Methodist mission moved in, staying until 1956. They served 2,000 meals a day during the 1889 dockers’ strike, which spawned Britain’s first trade union. Wilton’s served as a refuge for anti-fascist protestors during the 1936 Battle of Cable Street, and a bomb shelter during the war. It would have been torn down to make way for council flats, if John Betjeman hadn’t launched a campaign for the building to be listed.

Wilton’s reopened in 2000, but decades of neglect have left it semi-derelict. £4 million is required for ongoing repairs. Run by a charitable trust that receives no public funding, the building’s future is under threat. Go now and support this intriguing monument to East London’s chequered history.