

Gong-worthy dining at a modernist masterpiece

Toklas is more exciting than almost any other room in London

Tim Hayward 21 MINUTES AGO

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In the 1970s the architect Frederick Gibberd got the chance to build a city block in London on the Strand, opposite Bush House and dropping to Embankment. His previous achievements included Harlow New Town and Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral, and his plan for Arundel Great Court comprised five great Modernist blocks. The most startling innovation in his design was creating a podium at the upper street level that apparently penetrated each tower and unified them in a public courtyard overlooking the Thames. In its prime, it must have been as impressive as the South Bank or the Barbican.

Now, I'm a huge fan of Modernism, so buildings like this are simultaneously thrilling and difficult. The exterior, to anyone except the most ardent zealot, is brutal. Its glory lies in the masses and shapes of what became a gigantic lump of uneconomical office building, no longer appropriate to the time, city or society it serves. It was unconscionable that we should entirely lose it to future generations. It was entirely unreasonable to expect that it would remain whole.

They tore down the riverside end a few years ago, lucratively privatising the view and a new low-rise building was placed in the courtyard to take up all that "wasted" space. The landward end has, at least for now, been turned into offices, a club, shops, studios and spaces for art and performance. The look is stripped-to-the-bones apocalyptic, but it's all a bit knowing, a bit JG Ballard chic. Nothing has any of the calm grandeur or the utopian generosity of the original about it. Nothing except Toklas.

I know I shouldn't bang on about architecture in a food column, but Toklas is more exciting than almost any other room in London. Down one side of the original buildings, the courtyard level was thrust through the building above and hung out over Surrey Street as a terrace. During redevelopment, the internal space — designed by Stafford Schmool, who has also worked on the Barbican Centre — was cleared back to the original shuttered concrete and opened seamlessly on to the terrace. It is breathtaking. You eat, suspended among the derelict upper layers of the surrounding buildings, staring at the ceramic encrustation of the old Strand Tube station, realising how much of this part of London is actually Beaux Arts. Then you look inside to the open kitchen and it's like staring through a wound in the side of the Leviathan.

The furniture is suitably mid-century modern, the crowd a bit cashmere rollneck. If architecture and arts lecturers still used pencils, there would be half a dozen in every top pocket. The menu is artistically austere.

I began with the courgette fritti because I've long suspected that no species with a nervous system can resist them. I'd come to Toklas because they have a new chef who spent nearly a decade at the River Cafe before becoming head chef at the fashionable Japanese izakaya Dinings SW3. If there's one man anywhere in the world, therefore, qualified to deep fry zucchini in batter, it's Yohei Furuhashi.

They were gorgeous, as anticipated, with a lighter batter than you might be used to and thoughtfully trimmed with precise Nakiri work. We seem to be at the height of the awards season right now, so this one's getting my "best courgette fritti in London" gong, straight away.

Tamworth pork tonnato feels like a welcome River Cafe offshoot, but this one is exceptional. The pork was spot on, pink and moist without being raw or rare, but the sauce had just the subtlest hints of Japanese seasoning in there. Maybe sesame alongside the tuna? The tiniest hit of perilla? A standout execution of an absolute classic.

As I contemplated the empty windows of the buildings rising around me, considering how, if it were Paris or New York, these oculus dormers would reveal young academics studying in garrets or dancers practising at the barre, my reverie was interrupted by two **pigeons**, vigorously copulating in the potted olive tree overhanging my table. The waitress reassured me that they were, in fact, extraordinarily well-behaved and would neither land on the table nor shit down my neck and, as it turned out, she was entirely correct. Though I remain convinced that Toklas is going to be one of the most beautiful outdoor dining spots in London, until we can do something about “The **Pigeon Thing**” critics are going to sit at tables, their shoulders tensed in anticipation of the warm splat-n-dribble. Apparently, the Chinese say it’s a portent of good fortune. Not the bald Chinese, my friend ... not the bald ones.

There’s a lot of open fire going on in the kitchen, so I ordered a grilled lobster, though I confess I’m fonder of the steamed ones. It was a petite half, but well-filled, beautifully marked on the grill and someone had blessed it generously with an aspergillum of garlicky butter. They say the piattoni beans were brought in from Italy and who am I to argue? They were certainly a lot more pleasant than the leathery runner beans, which are our nearest equivalent, plus there was plenty of basil aioli to lubricate.

It’s worth mentioning the cheese board: British and sourced from Neal’s Yard. The varieties aren’t specified on the menu and as the waitress began introducing them, the **pigeons**, who I suspect had stopped for a cigarette, went for a fourth round with renewed spirit. I should have made notes, but I was too awed by their stamina. I recall, however, a blue, a goat and a washed-rind with thin slices of sourdough from the in-house bakery, and it was one of the best boards I’ve had in months.

Toklas is a stylish operation with chef, food and service that do credit to the room. To me, at least, that is the highest praise.

Toklas

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Starters 61-64

Starters: ~~£4-£14~~

Mains: ~~£17-£32~~

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Tim Hayward is the winner of best food writer at the Fortnum & Mason Food & Drink Awards 2022

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