

Fay Maschler

An acoustic haven on the South Bank — it just needs to relax over its food



RESTAURANT OF THE WEEK

Spiritland

★★★★☆

Belvedere Road, SE1 (020 3146 1980 spiritland.com). Mon-Wed 8am-11pm. Thurs-Sat 8am (10am Sat)-2am. Sun 10am-10pm. Lunch or dinner for two with wine about £140 including 12.5 per cent service.

IT'S time to talk about noise in restaurants. Unwilling to come across as an ancient grump, I don't always — just sometimes — harp on about the unpleasantness of sound ricocheting off unforgiving surfaces, thumping music shivering your timbers and having to give up on the idea of conversation with dinner.

Hiring an acoustics engineer when a new restaurant is planned is an expensive move but two of the most successful operators I know make it top of their list of priorities. If the budget doesn't allow it there are ruses — from rugs and cushions to nailing foam under tables — that can ameliorate decibels. Or Spiritland, investors in sounds, can be the backers.

Music lovers may already know Spiritland in King's Cross, with its studio and café, and its Headphone Bar in Mayfair. With some crossover of personnel Spiritland now also occupies the 180-seater space that was previously Canteen at the foot of the Royal Festival Hall. This new haven for listening sits appropriately under one of the first concert halls in the world designed using the application of scientific principles — some of which were apparently ignored by the builders. But is it bringing rewarding food to the area?

The companion who I invite for lunch has looked at the website and arrives armed with a battered sausage bought off a nearby van — he has suffered last-minute panic at the absence of main courses on the listed lunch menu, no mention of potatoes and what he anticipates will be "weird ungenerous plates from a hipster chef wish list including words I needed to Google and a £4.50 charge for bread and butter".

I find him looking reasonably happy but still a bit wary sitting near the pass in the corner of a room that could be a set out of Mad Men. Inspired by recording studios in the look, complete with egg box baffles and angled acoustic panels in the ceiling, it is furnished with curvaceous comfortable leather banquettes and droll faintly anthropomorphic period speakers.

The manager, whom we both remember from St John and Grain Store, has greeted me as "Milady" and continues to use that courteous form of address throughout the meal.

We start by sharing kohlrabi, orange, fennel and Atari goma purée (sesame paste), which is a blameless salad and from the short pasta section; seemingly homemade tagliatelle with perfect texture but feeble pepperonata saucing.



At a previous dinner I have tried galotiri, friorelli, medjool date and date molasses, almonds — which errs on the side of saccharine — and crab, prawns, jalapeño, crème fraîche, bonito (with the dried tuna flakes still waving in the warmth) where the chilli is unbearing.

Sounding board: Spiritland, top, where dishes include kohlrabi with orange, fennel and Atari goma purée, above

Head chef is Mauro Petrozziello we are told. Presumably he is Italian. Perhaps it is executive chef Karl Calvert, aka Moondog, formerly working with Peter Gordon at Providores, who has contributed to the Tower of Babel menu format. Complexity such as this requires sedulous attention...

In the main course the Esperanto of lamb rump, celeriac almond skordalia, braised chard, spiced jus is joyfully comprehensible with the meat cooked exactly à point.

Chicken, parsley and chervil root, pear, shallots, fig vincotto exhibits a sweetness that doesn't belong. It is with a sigh of relief that I spot potato, rosemary-smoked salt, Parmesan oil among the side dishes. They are ordered and gratefully received. Dessert of Urfa chilli, dulce de leche, passion fruit meringue, spiced popcorn according to my chum would be excellent

"were it not for the popcorn which I which I group with celery, polenta and sweet potato as non-food items".

"You didn't have to be so nice," once sang The Lovin' Spoonful, a group of mainly Jewish New Yorkers who affected to be Californian hippies (although not here), "I would have liked you anyway." It is what I feel about Spiritland.

The catering is needlessly effortful in a venue so fundamentally pleasurable. I have plans to return on a Thursday, Friday or Saturday evening when cocktails come into their own, DJs play and I hear that dancing can also happen. Word-associating Milady with Milord and therefore Edith Piaf I sing what I feel is only appropriate: "Allez, venez Milord/Vous assoier à ma table/ Il fait si froid dehors/ Ici c'est confortable." No one is disturbed.

@Fay_Maschler

FAY'S FAVOURITES

Calm surround sounds

Baoziinn
Mellow jazz, gentle staff, no time constraints on excellent dim sum.
24 Romilly Street, W1. baoziinn.com

Nopi
Yotam Ottolenghi used Oscar Acoustics to render shiny surfaces softly spoken.
21 Warwick Street, W1. ottolenghi.co.uk/nopi

The French House
High-calibre conversation provides the soundtrack for Neil Borthwick's ace food.
49 Dean Street, W1. frenchhousesoho.com

FIVE THINGS FAY ATE THIS WEEK

● It was still soft opening at Indian-inspired Farzi Café (fully open now) where butter-roast beef marrow with vegetable crisps is as luxurious as it's arguably renegade.

● After the Royal Opera House general rehearsal of Tchaikovsky's powerfully staged opera The Queen of

Spades, clam chowder with smoked bacon at delightful Parsons in Endell Street.

● A pal who lives in Greenwich leads me to pan-Asian Zaibatsu café where an extensive menu is notably reasonable and batter for tempura, pictured, ethereal.

● In Me and Mr B at Crazy Coqs

redoubtable Anita Gillette sings tributes to her late friend Irving Berlin. In Brasserie Zedel I have my favourite first course: carrottes rapées, for £3.45.



● Sunday at MEATliquor KingsX — and for five more Sundays — a tasting menu from Filipino-flavoured BBQ Dreamz, a hit on BBC Two's My Million Pound Menu. Loved the adobo glazed crispy cauliflower.

DANIEL HAMBURY