

HANNAH ROBINSON AND RACHEL HOWARD



SECRET LONDON

UNUSUAL BARS & RESTAURANTS



JONGLEZ PUBLISHING

HESTER'S HIDEOUT

9

The hoochiest of the coochiest

Basement of 2 Exmouth Market, Clerkenwell, EC1R 4PX

020 7837 7139

hestershideoout.com

Monday–Thursday 5pm–12am, Friday–Saturday 5pm–2.30am

Burlesque cabaret Friday and Saturday from 8pm; booking essential

Tube station: Farringdon, Angel or King's Cross

Hester's Hideout is in a basement on the corner of Exmouth Market and Farringdon Road. The only clue that you've got the right building is a curlicued "H" etched into the glass of a no entry door. Eventually you figure it out: the entrance is through Paesan, the large bright Italian trattoria where families and friends are eating tasteful platters of antipasti and big bowls of traditional pasta.



Photos by Jan Pearson

But descend the internal stairs and you find yourself in an entirely different atmosphere. Restraint is not the byword here. Bawdy might be. The cocktails are full strength, and at the weekends the entertainment is in your face. Literally. The great thing about Hester's is how close up it all is. There's no stage separating the performers from the audience, the singing and dancing is right up in your personal space.

On Sneak Easy Fridays, the Vaudevillian Mister Meredith is at the piano, belting out saucy ballads with a smattering of enthusiastic tap dancing, his steel-tipped brogues perilously close to your face. Then out swings Hannah Lou, a barefoot Carmen Miranda (sans fruit bowl) who shimmies into the snugs and lures out guests with her hypnotising hips.

Though the audience, it must be said, don't need much persuasion. They are thoroughly game. Maybe it's the cocktails. Or maybe it's the way Marlene Cheaptrick balances a martini on her head while performing a handstand, shooting poppers from her bra and singing an uncensored version of "Falling in Love Again".

A Chinese whisper game starts off with "I love your cock;" heaven knows where it can go from there. One gentleman seems quite content to submit to wearing Marlene's fur stole as a wig while she does a headstand on his crotch, her legs wide open below his chin. Deux Ailes perform erotic lesbian gymnastics; at this distance, you can see the veins straining around one Elle's extraordinarily strong arms. By the end of the night, everyone is up dancing. And it's all got a bit non sequitur. One gent gives us his top tips on how to dry the testicles with a special walk. Another gets into an in-depth marriage therapy session with a stranger.

I am reminded of Dorothy Parker's warnings about the perils of more than two cocktails. But you can rest assured that if you do end up under your host, it will probably be as part of a burlesque stage trick. And that's only Fridays. Apparently Saturdays are the really wild nights.



WALLUC

4

An homage to fromage

40 Redchurch Street, E2 7DP

07864 219140 (text only)

Most evenings from 7pm but text to check

Tube station: Shoreditch High Street or Liverpool Street



Arriving at Walluc is like walking into an Aki Kaurasmäki film set: a small front room filled with scruffy chairs, guitars, fishing nets, two or three motorbikes, and staffed by a couple of rockabillies in turn-up jeans. In the background, a washing line is pegged with clothes. In fact, the film reference is very specific: owner Luca's inspiration is from the classic *Trilogie Marseillaise*, three acclaimed films (*Marius*, *Fanny* and *César*) set around the port city of Marseille and made in the 1930s by Marcel Pagnol, considered France's first cinematic genius. The restaurant defies Shoreditch's hipster norms. There is no website or even an email. You need to text to book a table (not phone) as Luca might be on his motorbike.

The hours are unreliable; the heating, lighting or coffee machine may be on the blink. Some sheets of kitchen paper serve as napkins. The menu is short. It's basically melted cheese – fondue or raclette; charcuterie to start, a salad to accompany. There are four or five wines on the list, all the same price. Service is laid-back: you might get chatting to Luca for a while before he heads down the steep stairs to melt more cheese. If you ask for something that's not on the menu, he'll probably nip out and buy it for you from a nearby shop.

My barrister friend and I have chosen the fondue, and she tolerates my cheese puns while we await the hotting pot. Listen Caerphilly. Best cheese for blindfolding a horse? Mascarpone. Who am I to dis a brie?, etc. etc. Her diet is vegetarian and gluten free, but that's no problem – I'd texted that request ahead and Luca had located vegetarian cheese and some delicious crusty gluten-free bread, along with simple new potatoes, boiled to the right soft-but-firmness. The *pot au fromage* is placed over a grid of tea candles and we get a bucket of spikey bread-wrangling tools. It's perfect gooey yumminess, provoking an unspoken cheese race.

My legal friend cunningly distracts me with short but open questions, and dives in for a solo cheese spree while I attempt to answer. But then blinded by candlelight, she makes the rookie error of losing her bread chunk. I swiftly make up for lost cheese time while she frantically rotates through implements to fish out the escapee cube. By the time we've reached the golden crust at the bottom of the Le Creuset, it's a satisfying dead heat (a feta compli if you will).

YE OLDE MITRE

⑦

The most secret pub in Cambridgeshire

1 Ely Court (entrance from Ely Place or between 9 & 10 Hatton Garden),

Farringdon, EC1N 6SJ

020 7405 4751

www.yeoldemitreholborn.co.uk

yeoldemitre@fullers.co.uk

Monday–Friday 11am–11pm

Tube station: Chancery Lane or Farringdon



“This is definitely London’s most hidden pub,” says John Wright, who served pints of real ale and toasted cheese sandwiches at Ye Olde Mitre for 27 years. Technically, this pub isn’t in London at all. Originally built in 1546 for the servants of Ely Palace, London seat of the Bishop of Ely, it’s still officially part of Cambridgeshire. Back in those days, England’s bishops all had a residence in London because they sat in Parliament. Ely Palace was one of the grandest, with fountains, vineyards and strawberry fields stretching as far as the Thames.

Today’s incarnation of Ye Olde Mitre dates from 1772, soon after Ely Palace was demolished. The wonky little pub is hidden down an alley linking Ely Place, a gated Georgian cul-de-sac, and Hatton Garden, an enclave of Jewish diamond dealers. The latter is named after Christopher Hatton, a mover and shaker in the court of Elizabeth I. In 1576, Hatton sweet-talked the Queen into leasing him a large part of Ely Palace for a yearly rent of one red rose, ten loads of hay and £10. Hatton later became Lord Chancellor, but didn’t manage his own finances very well: he died owing the Crown £40,000.

In the pub’s firelit front parlour is the preserved trunk of a cherry tree, which marked the boundary between Hatton’s and the Bishop’s property. Allegedly, Elizabeth I performed the maypole dance around this tree. Wooden settles and Tudor portraits line the mahogany-panelled back room, which leads to Ye Closet, a snug that merits the name. Barrels are dotted around the cloistered courtyard, an oasis on summer nights. The menu is as traditional as the interior: sandwiches, sausages, gherkins, and a fine selection of ales.

Sadly, beadies no longer call the hours or light the street lamps, but licensing hours are still fixed to the closing of the gates on Ely Place, so Ye Olde Mitre is shut at weekends. Until 1978, London’s police could only enter Ely Place by invitation. “Criminals would run down the alley because the coppers couldn’t follow them,” Wright recalls. “They’d have to lock the gates and wait for reinforcements from Cambridge.”

NEARBY

Le Café du Marché

⑧

Charterhouse Mews, 22 Charterhouse Square, Farringdon, EC1M 6DX

020 7608 1609

www.cafedumarche.co.uk

Hidden down a cobbled mews off Charterhouse Square, this très French restaurant has a loyal following. The set menu is hit-and-miss, but the authentically Gallic ambience is seductive. Le Grenier upstairs is perfect for clandestine trysts (and does excellent frites), occasionally accompanied by a jazz trio.

BARTS

②

Serviced apartments with hidden benefits

Chelsea Cloisters, Sloane Avenue, Chelsea, SW3 3DW

020 7581 3355

www.barts-london.com

shh@barts-london.com

Sunday–Tuesday 6pm–12am, Wednesday–Friday 6pm–1am, Saturday 2pm–1am

Tube station: South Kensington or Sloane Square

The dark heart of Chelsea is not the sort of place you'd expect to find a clandestine drinking den. Nor indeed is Chelsea Cloisters, a hulking block of serviced apartments rising above the expense account restaurants of Sloane Avenue. Only the building's 1930s architecture gives some clue to the speakeasy that lies within.

Stroll as nonchalantly as you can past the corporate, carpeted reception. On your left is a small black door with an inconspicuous sign. This leads to a booth disconcertingly lined with Mickey Mouse wallpaper and a neon sign for Tattoos & Piercing. Press the buzzer and eventually a flap in the door opens; it's like a gangster movie, only instead of a gun-toting meathead it's a hunky toff who lets you in.

Inspired by L'Esquina in New York – a tequila bar hidden below a taqueria – the venue used to be a bar with a rather seedy reputation

for nocturnal activities. The sultry space is decorated with junk shop curios: cuckoo clocks, vintage signs, and stuffed animal heads. The only concession to the Chelsea location is a trunk filled with wigs, hats and feather boas, catering to the Sloane Rangers' obsession with fancy dress. (Prince Harry would have a field day – and probably has.)

Behind the bar, a fuzzy TV plays old Charlie Chaplin movies. Boys in braces and girls in glad rags dispense shots of absinthe with rum-infused fruit from the Thirst Aid box, or killer concoctions served in top hats and teapots, in line with the Prohibition theme. Signature cocktails have saucy names like Absinthe Minded and Tallulah's Tipple. The Charleston Crumble – rhubarb and pomegranate vodka martini – is especially addictive. As the menu warns: "Two or three of these and you'll be tapping and flapping all night."

The speakeasy soundtrack progresses from '30s swing through to '80s cheese. The crowd is international, but there's a real community spirit. Regulars are given their own key cards and priority booking at weekends, when the small space gets crammed. Even so, many people who live round the corner have yet to discover it.

Illicit pleasures include British comfort food – cheese on toast, sausage rolls, macaroni cheese – and Lucky Strike cigarettes. The cosy backyard is one of the sexiest places for smokers in London. But don't take the "Clothing optional beyond this point" sign seriously. It's cold out there. And if you look up at the winking windows, you'll be reminded that you're in an apartment block.



THE PEOPLE'S FRIDGE

16

Fridge magnates

49 Brixton Station Road, SW9 8PQ

www.peoplesfridge.com

peoplesfridge@gmail.com

07860 021261 (text only)

Monday–Thursday 9am–7pm, Friday–Sunday 9am–5pm

Tube station: Brixton

If you push past all the funky crowds, foodie stalls, pop-up bars and vintage shops crammed under the Pop Brixton roof, right at the back you will find Freddie, the coolest dude in the room. Freddie is The People's Fridge. He's got food for anyone that needs it. And if you've got some you don't need, you can give it to him and he'll keep it safe for someone who does. Local restaurants regularly stock the fridge. There are no restrictions on who can take from it, no stigma involved. The people behind The People's Fridge are ... just behind The People's Fridge. The glass doors overlooking Freddie are Impact Hub's offices, a co-working space for freelancers and social entrepreneurs. In 2016 they ran an MIT-designed course called u.lab, which helps create collaborative change in communities. They chose food inequality as their focus: so many people living in food poverty, and

yet so much good food going to waste. How could they join these two up? During an online forum, someone posted about a community fridge in Spain – and the idea seemed to fit perfectly. They set up a crowdfunding campaign to raise the money to buy the fridge, and not only hit their target, but doubled it. So they were able to create a bespoke fridge shelter, and host events to encourage more community sharing.

It wasn't all plain sailing – they had to overcome council concerns about safety and management, and relocate Freddie from the planned front-of-house location to the back of the market. But that turned out to have its advantages because it gives people some privacy. They worked out a staff rota and some food safety rules – no raw meat, raw fish or opened milk, and only food businesses can donate cooked foods. Individuals can give fruit, vegetables, bread and unopened packaged foods. One of the other outreach events that has emerged is Open Project Night: an evening where everyone is welcome to come to Impact Hub Brixton, meet people, eat food and exchange ideas. “We make food central to the evenings”, they say, “because it has this amazing ability to create a sense of sharing. It crosses divides and helps people to open up and connect more easily.” Open Project Night runs at Impact Hub Brixton every Monday from 6.30pm, and you're welcome to go eat with them, or email to arrange a project tour. Perhaps you might help cook up something even more brilliant than Freddie.



THE CLINK

17

Pros and cons

Her Majesty's Prison Brixton, Jebb Avenue, SW2 5XF

020 8678 9007

thelinkcharity.org

brixton@thelinkrestaurant.com

Monday–Friday breakfast 8.15am–10am, lunch 12pm–3pm, afternoon tea 2pm–4pm, Thursday gourmet dinner 6pm–9pm

Tube station: Brixton or Stockwell

Buses: 45, 59, 109, 118, 133, 159, 250

I'm going to jail today. It's a short sentence – just two hours of Her Majesty's pleasure, and hopefully mine and the ladies I'm lunching with. We're booked into The Clink, a prison-based restaurant which trains inmates for work in the hospitality industry. The list of things you can't take inside is quite long. There's the obvious tech and weapon stuff, but also no maps, sunglasses or hats (an old-fashioned disguised break-out could still work). No tissues which could be impregnated with drugs. No Blu Tack, gum or anything impressionable (well, apart from us). Me and the other jailbirds put everything except our credit cards in the locker and head towards the high walls.

The first huge Victorian arched doorway squeals and creaks as it slides open. High overhead mirrors provide an overview as a thorough body

search is conducted. Don't arrive too hungry as all this security process can take half an hour. Eventually we are escorted through into the prison yard. Razor wires curl overhead. Six jail wings surround. The old prison governor's house we're heading for has distinctly bar-like wrought iron on the windows.

But once we're inside, it's a contemporary chic dining room with brown slate walls and large purple cakebox lampshades. The menu is modern British, with blurbs for each item which describe not how it tastes, but what it teaches the students: "Learning how to de-bone a chicken is a key skill taught under unit 223." Our waiter is Rosca, a very polite and friendly young man who has gained his City & Guilds NVQ and already has two job offers awaiting his release. He recommends the sea bass starter and it's really good – three little silver-skinned squares of grilled fillet on a courgette ratatouille, drizzled with a lemon reduction and decorated with delicate basil leaf crisps. Someone in the kitchen thoroughly deserves unit 220.

You can come to the Clink for breakfast, lunch, high tea or the Thursday-night gourmet dinner. There's no alcohol on the menu but they mix a mean mocktail. Most of their vegetables are grown in Clink gardens, and the eggs laid by Clink hens, providing not just fresh nutrition but horticulture and animal husbandry training. Graduates are often employed by big-name chains like Wahaca, Carluccio's and Thistle Hotels. Reoffending rates have been reduced by nearly 50%. It's such an excellent project, I might have to go back one morning for some more porridge.



RIVOLI BALLROOM

①

Sex in the suburbs

346–350 Brockley Road, Crofton Park, SE4 2BY

020 8692 5130

www.rivoliballroom.com

rivoliballroom@live.com

Open first Saturday and first and third Sunday of the month; check website for other one-off events

Rail station: Crofton Park or Brockley then 15-minute walk

Buses: 171, 172, 122

It requires effort to reach the Rivoli Ballroom, but the schlep to deepest suburbia is worth it: this is surely one of London's sexiest venues. Despite its art deco frontage, you might walk right past the Rivoli, if it weren't for the vintage car parked outside. On either side of the entrance, two original signs read "Dancing" and "Tonight". People still come here to dance, but sadly it's no longer open every night.

The Rivoli opened as Crofton Park Picture Palace in 1913. Like many cinemas, it closed in the 1950s as television gripped the nation. After a makeover by local dance enthusiast Leonard Tomlin, it reopened as the Rivoli Ballroom in 1959. Tomlin's flamboyant interior – a riot of neoclassical, art deco and oriental motifs – is intact. A foyer with marquetry panelling leads to the ballroom, a vaulted vision of scarlet and gold. The walls are lined with red velour and gilt encrusted with diamanté.

Couples glide across the sprung maple dance floor, their sparkly frocks shimmering beneath crystal chandeliers, Chinese lanterns and disco balls.

Two bars flank the ballroom: one with red leather booths and an Arabesque tiled bar, the other with gold flock wallpaper and a mosaic ceiling. Even the etiquette is old fashioned: the barmaid calls you "Miss" and everyone waits in a single line to order drinks.

The first Sunday of the month is devoted to ballroom dancing, with owner Bill Mannix acting as DJ. Now in his 70s, Bill has run the Rivoli for over 30 years but none of the regulars have ever seen him dance. Everyone else does, though. Glamorous couples of all ages foxtrot and quickstep across the room like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Many of the dancers have worked as extras on films shot at the Rivoli. It's occasionally used for concerts and music videos; Tina Turner and Florence and the Machine have both taken to the stage.

Regular events include the popular Rouges 70s/80s disco night, pop-up cinema screenings, and the monthly Jive Party, with live bands playing vintage Americana. The evening starts with a jive dance class for beginners and ends with a rockabilly crowd sweating it out to lindy hop. At Jacky's Jukebox on the first Saturday of the month, men go into the ladies boudoir and come out dressed as women and the music segues from Louis Prima to *Saturday Night Fever*. Then there's The Magic Theatre, where guests must "dress to impress, astonish and entice" – just like the Rivoli Ballroom itself.



THE KING'S HEAD

5

Taxidermorama

257 Kingsland Road, Hoxton, E2 8AS

020 7729 9419

thekingshead-london.com

emma@thekingshead-london.com

Tuesday 7pm–1am, Wednesday 7pm–3am, Thursday 7pm–4am, Friday and Saturday 7pm–5am

Membership required (see note below for special deal)

Overground station: Hoxton or Haggerston



As you walk up the Kingsland Road, you pass a pretty derelict-looking Irish pub, its shutters firmly down, paint peeling on the letters advertising “Pool, Darts and Setanta Sports.” If that’s what you’re after, you’re in the wrong place. Hidden behind this crumbling façade is a secret private members’ club. But this is no Groucho or Blacks, it’s more like walking into a still-life Serengeti.

Leaping over the top of the ground-floor bar is a huge ferocious liger – a cross between a lion and a tiger – frozen mid-pounce. The mounted heads of a rhino and a hippo peer out from the back wall. Climb the stairs – your hand brushing the vivid geometric print wall linen – and you will find more rooms, each more mind-blowing than the last. A polar bear rears up to his full height in the icy blue Regency drawing room.

A dining room is lined with 3,000 beautiful butterflies. A bathroom is fully occupied by four peacocks and a prowling tiger. Perched on the beams beneath the stairwell skylight is a static aviary filled with parrots, cockatoos and toucans. The last room at the top is perhaps the most extraordinary. A geometrically tiled bedroom strewn with wild cats – snow leopards, cheetahs, black panthers, lions and leopards. Snaking out of the ceiling are the huge neck and head of a giraffe – presumably the rest of her occupying the loft.

This spectacular safari was the vision of the owner, known to all as Rocky, who runs several bars around Shoreditch. He had amassed a huge collection of taxidermy – all antique and second hand – and wanted to showcase them somehow. But he couldn’t just put them in a regular bar, there needed to be some way of protecting them. And given the high density of vegetarians in the Hoxton area, there would be many telling him to get stuffed. But a private members’ club stops people just stumbling in, and also has the advantage of really late licensing hours. So Rocky set about converting the old pub, choosing the intensely decorative fabrics, furniture and tiles himself.

Though the list price might look a bit steep, you can get a special secret deal of £29 for annual membership if you tell them that you read about the wild cats in *Secret London: Unusual Bars & Restaurants* – the deal includes a pair of their delicious cocktails, so worth it even if you only go once. Dress flamboyantly and be ready for a wild night on the tiles.



BEHIND THIS WALL

11

Turning the tables

411 Mare Street, Hackney, E8 1HY
020 8985 3927

www.behindthiswall.com
alex@behindthiswall.com

Tuesday–Sunday 6pm–11 pm

Rail station: Hackney Central or Hackney Downs

Buses: 30, 38, 55, 48, 106, 236, 253, 276, D6, W15



“**B**ehind This Wall” was a piece of graffiti at Willesden Junction that Alex Harris passed every day on his way to his job teaching music technology. Then it was the name of a club night he ran. Then it was music pop-up events at which he became as good at mixing drinks as he was at spinning records. And now it’s the name of his hidden basement bar, not really behind a wall, but down some inauspicious stairs on Hackney’s recently widened Narrow Way. Once you finally find the right doorway, it’s not the dark and dingy dive bar you might expect. Alex and his team built it themselves, turning the tables, chairs and bar out of pale plywood, which gives the room a light, minimalist Scandi feel. The DJ deck isn’t in a corner behind a booth; the matching plywood plinth lowers down on ropes from the ceiling and hovers in the open space at just the right height. On it stand a single Technics turntable, a 1970s EAR preamp and a pair of glass valve amplifiers. Alex is an audio obsessive. The speakers were once owned by Martin Hannett, the brilliant but famously unstable Factory Records producer who found the distinctive sound for bands like Joy Division and the Happy Mondays. Serious record collectors come flying like bees to a honey-covered valve amp. They play an eclectic mix of jazz, soul, funk, hip-hop, house and maybe some techno. Surprisingly, you’re allowed to ask them to turn it down if the music exceeds comfort levels – audiophiles have a tendency to suffer from hearing loss.

The cocktail ingredients are pretty niche too. They make their own syrups and juices, keeping everything as natural, fresh and low in sugar as possible. The drinks menu is seasonal – when I dropped by, it was spring and they had a seriously delicious homemade rhubarb and basil kombucha in the mix. The theory is that if you have fewer preservatives, colourings and sugar, then you’ll get a more natural buzz and less of a hangover. Or you can hang the hangover altogether and go for their tasty temperance drinks. The best time to go is during happy hour from 6 to 8pm, when not only are there discounted drinks, but also oysters for £1 each. The best day to go is Sunday evening, when they hold their secret record launch parties. And perhaps the best house rule is that women should introduce themselves to men, not vice versa. Another table well turned.



MY NEIGHBOURS THE DUMPLINGS

14

Hidden hanging garden

165 Lower Clapton Road, Hackney, E5 8EQ

020 3327 1556

myneighboursthedumplings.com

info@myneighboursthedumplings.com

Tuesday–Thursday 6pm–10.30pm, Friday 6pm–11pm, Saturday 5pm–11pm,

Sunday 5pm–9.30pm

Rail station: Clapton, Hackney Downs or Hackney Central

My Neighbours the Dumplings is a lovely fresh dim sum restaurant, run by young, hard-working couple Kris and Bec. As you might tell from the name, they're fans of Studio Ghibli animation. But they also wanted the restaurant, which started off as a pop-up, to have a neighbourhood feel. And it's worked: they're usually quite packed on a weekend evening, with the local Claptonites tucking into little baskets of handmade *sui mai* and *har gau*, or small plates of crispy lamb and coriander pot-stickers. To finish, there are less traditional chocolate dumplings: slim spring rolls filled with milk chocolate and served with a spoonful of salted caramel and a ball of stiff vanilla ice cream. The place is

busy, the kitchen is open and the music level is high.

But what many don't discover is the hidden hanging garden out the back. You have to go through Matilda's to get there – a basement sake bar named after their daughter, who was born one month after they opened (an accidental bit of timing, which they don't necessarily recommend). Behind the bar, premium craft sakes and oriental-influenced cocktails are on offer, accompanied by guest DJs or the occasional band. Kris used to play in a band called "One eskimo" so the couple have many musician friends. But keep going through the winding corridor and up the steps. And suddenly you emerge into another world. Diffuse light from the glass ceiling fills the room. Dark green plants line the rough red brick walls. Colourful glowing lanterns hang at different levels above long wooden bench tables. A huge monochrome print of the Panchen Lama by Tavares Strachen stares out from the back wall. High up, a toy train runs around a rooftop track. It's quite magical. The perfect place to sip one of the speciality teas, which arrive in glass pots with a little sand timer to ensure they're brewed just right.

When I looked around, it was just before opening time: the main table was being used by the chefs for a mass dumpling stuffing session. Kris was up in the main kitchen, prepping for service, and Bec, heavily pregnant with their second baby, was off to pick Matilda up from nursery. It feels like everyone is very hands on here. It may be a ten–fifteen minute walk from any of the area's overground train stations, but it's worth the trip ...

