



Marina O'Loughlin reviews Toklas, Strand, London

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MATTHIEU LAVANCHY

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My blazing infatuation with Toklas took a while to kindle. Well, it took till salad — not something I expected to be typing any time soon. It's not that I'm anti-brutalism — quite the contrary — but this new restaurant attached to a 1970s monolithic block of a “cultural centre”, 180 The Strand, seems at first sight to have taken its severe setting and sucked all the personality out of it. Initially it came across to this evidently hideous philistine like the café attached to an out-of-town retail park.

Oh, the terrible shallowness, the shame. By the time I leave I'm pretty much an ardent fan, sniffiness shifting into this self-recrimination at my folly, my blinkered lack of comprehension that its plainness is studied and deliberate — far more Ernö Goldfinger than Oak Furnitureland. (Brutalism has nothing to do with the movement's aggressive lack of cosiness, by the way, and everything to do with *béton brut*, French for raw concrete.)

I should have known, really. The people behind it, Amanda Sharp and Matthew Slotover, co-founded the glittering Frieze art fairs and

magazine. The idea that they'd create anything other than radical is as unthinkable as hanging that poster of the tennis player scratching her arse on a gallery wall. I probably shouldn't even be writing about this restaurant in normal English anyway, but in IAE (International Art English), the rarefied lingua franca of the gallerist's blurb.

The moment the scales fell properly from my eyes was the arrival of that bloody salad. Anyone installing a chef (Martyn Lyons, ex-Spring and Moro) who takes this amount of care over an apparently haphazard collection of leaves is clearly curating their restaurant — yes, the proper use of this overworked word — every bit as beadily as their exhibitions.

That reticence, that refusal to go balls-out and splashy or fashionable and trend-ticking, extends to the cooking. Each dish is a subtle, untweezery, blob-defying knockout, a Mediterranean-scented celebration of produce as hero. There's panisse — fried batons of chickpea batter, golden-crisp shells and custard-creamy insides, scattered with sage; the restaurant's own superb sourdough with good butter.

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My prejudice extends also to initially dismissing the pasta dish — fettuccine with buffalo butter and parmesan — as “basic”. This is turning into a wallow in mea culpas: it’s anything but. In fact it’s a bravura demonstration of the joys of simplicity, the tangy, lactic quality of the buffalo milk lifting a dish — effectively my childhood tea when my mother couldn’t be bothered — into something luxurious, indulgent, the cheese clinging to the butter in a way that’s equal parts soothing and thrilling.

And the paradigm-shifting salad? (Sorry, art-speak is infectious.) It appears to be slapdash, thrown together, mostly radicchio varieties chosen for their visual drama: assertive tardivo, flouncy Castelfranco, gently bitter shell-pink-veined rosa del Veneto. But a mouthful and its genius unfurls like one of the leaves — the crunch of toasted hazelnuts scattered through, in its depths lilting notes of orange peel and hazelnut oil.

Meanwhile the place is getting under my skin too. Like the brutalist movement itself, its uncompromising beauty takes a while to make itself known. There are walls of splashy posters of past exhibitions, but tucked away in the bar area. A vast Wolfgang Tillmans photograph dominates one bare plaster wall, glossy tomatoes and tumescent aubergines dropped by the side of a swimming pool. The straw-bottomed chairs — it’s actually paper cord and, randomly, every now and then there’s a coral- coloured one — are Borge Mogensen’s “People’s Chair”.

Toklas also operates as a bakery and grocery shop. That excellent dark-crustured sourdough is available to take away and around one corner there’s a beautiful, almost art-directed display of stout, floury loaves. Gradually it all becomes very sexy in an ascetic, horn-rimmed,

hot-architect kind of way. Everyone eating there on my visit looks significant, in that sort of art-world-famous vibe that always makes a gal feel inappropriately dressed. Even the (lovely) staff.

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Lyons is clever at lacing unexpected flavours through his dishes. Grilled chicken — the only meat that appears on the menu — has a splendid hit of smoke from the grill infusing its crisped skin, but gets even more of a kick from some insanely pungent little black olives mixed through its heap of cime di rapa. The bitter vegetable has been cooked in the truly Italian way — to within an inch of its life, more slump than side, so its vegetal intensity almost becomes a whole new taste profile. Florentines would adore it. Monkfish with mussels and chickpeas is less complex, still good, a spark of lemon zest giving a lift. (And, truthfully, both dishes could have done with the tiniest amount less cooking.) Both chocolate pudding tart — like dense budino on a graham cracker crust — and a sensually gritty quince and almond tart are, neatly, works of art.



From left: monkfish, mussel and chickpea stew with aioli; chocolate pudding pie
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It's a freezing day when we visit but, come summer, I can't wait to hang out on the huge, plant-decked outdoor terrace overlooking the haunted side entrance to the old Strand station; a glass of our good and reasonably priced Tule Bianco Catarratto from the short, sharp wine list, or one of Toklas's genuinely excellent cocktails in hand. Maybe panisse, maybe grilled langoustines with garlic, chilli and lemon, definitely a salad. Never mind the art, I plan to be a regular installation here in '22.

PS: It's not my beat but I also love 180 Studios, the gallery to which Toklas is attached and nothing to do with Frieze as far as I know, other than its offices being on an upstairs floor. I've come out of two of the studios' recent exhibitions, Ryoji Ikeda and Lux, pleasantly reeling and disorientated, mind temporarily blown. The best kind of show.

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