

How To Spend It Food & Drink

A first taste at Toklas: the gallerists' new go-to canteen

The couple behind Frieze have cooked up a modernist Mediterranean kitchen in London

Ajesh Patalay. Photography by Matthieu Lavanchy NOVEMBER 1 2021

“We like to learn,” says Matthew Slotover of his latest endeavour with Amanda Sharp, a restaurant called [Toklas](#), named after Gertrude Stein’s partner and cookbook writer Alice B Toklas, which can be found in the brutalist building at 180 The Strand. “We like to throw ourselves in the deep end and see if we can swim.”

As part-owners and non-exec directors of [Frieze](#), the duo no longer shoulder the burden of running the fair (they stepped back in 2016), which includes Frieze London and Frieze Masters. Nor of managing *Frieze* magazine, which they launched 30 years ago. Instead, they’ve got an entirely new “toy” (to use Slotover’s mischievous term) to play with. Gallerist Barbara Gladstone calls them “suckers for punishment” for diving headlong into the notoriously difficult business of restaurants, but Sharp and Slotover see it differently. If someone gets upset with them in the art fair, they lose £100,000. If someone gets upset in the restaurant, they lose £30. “This is much easier,” insists Slotover. “Of course, we’re a bit terrified too.”





A mango and passion-fruit semifreddo © Matthieu Lavanchy

When we meet ahead of the official opening, the 70-cover restaurant has so far only played host to friends and family (it was the venue for Slotover's daughter's wedding), along with private dinners for galleries such as David Zwirner and Rodeo. "It's been like a party every night," says Slotover. "So joyful," agrees Sharp, who compares it to a bat mitzvah in terms of it bringing together people they love.

The John Dory to share was a rustic platter worthy of Picasso

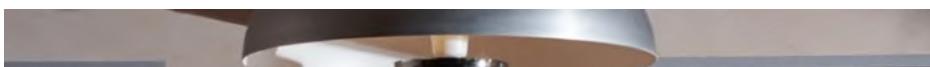
The pair first floated the idea of starting a restaurant together as 18-year-old students at Oxford. At the time, they envisaged a kind of gastropub. But when a friend of their parents opened a restaurant and lost a fortune, they ditched the idea. Still, they remained keen cooks and, after launching the fair in 2003, started hosting dinners at restaurants and got even

more into food. On trips abroad, they'd spend as much time planning which restaurants to visit as galleries. When Frieze moved into its current offices on The Strand in 2017, their landlord Mark Wadhwa asked if they'd be interested in taking over additional space downstairs. They saw their chance to open a restaurant, with a prestige bakery and grocery store attached: "We probably would never have had the nerve if Mark hadn't offered the space," says Slotover.





Toklas's instore bakery © Matthieu Lavanchy





A 1993 Wolfgang Tillmans photograph in the Toklas dining room © Matthieu Lavanchy

They hope Toklas becomes a place you go and bump into people you know. For them, that's [Rochelle Canteen](#), [The Wolseley](#) and [River Café](#) in London. Or [Omen](#) in New York, where you can find "Gilbert and George at one table and Laurie Anderson at another", says Slotover. "It's such fun." Having lovely, unpretentious staff front of house will hopefully engender a feeling of belonging too. "Honestly, a smile goes a really long way," says Sharp.

The space will surely be a draw too. The bar/dining room feels like a cross between a 1970s college canteen and the Barbican. It is thrillingly casual and austere at the same time. There are art posters. Lots of concrete. Reclaimed wood. And an expansive terrace like the overhang on a multistorey car park. At night, the scene is beautifully lit and bewitching.





A chocolate and pudding pie © Matthieu Lavanchy

As for the food: "We want it to be excellent but we're not trying to reinvent the wheel," says Slotover of the simple Mediterranean menu overseen by head chef Martyn Lyons (formerly of Spring and Moro). Vegetables and seafood dominate (there is no red meat). Most extraordinary was the fish. Eating a starter of grilled sardines with crushed potatoes (dressed in shallots, green peppers and vinegar) was like being transported to a beach in Greece. Salt, lemon, oil, vinegar. I could almost feel the sand between my toes. The John Dory to share (a whole grilled fish will be a permanent fixture) was a rustic platter worthy of Picasso, with its charred and glistening skin, perfectly cooked flesh, and braised fennel and spinach. The chips on the side were so crisp they clattered out of the bowl. I was in heaven.

"When we launched the fair," says Sharp, "we focused on making it a nice place to be: bring in architects, designers, good food. Make it a place you want to stay. It's not that different a philosophy from a restaurant." They're definitely onto something.

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