

Gluten-free special
Dan Lepard's multiseed bread

Feast

Issue No.103 Saturday 4 January 2020

Yotam Ottolenghi

Chickpea pancakes,
mango yoghurt

Thomasina Miers

Spicy lentil and
spinach soup

Anna Jones

Millionaire's
shortbread

Meera Sodha

Tiger roll sushi

Fiona Beckett

Alcohol-free drinks

Felicity Cloake

Perfect brownies

Tamal Ray

Blood orange
syrup loaf cake

Grace Dent

'Hearty, jolly and
wholly delicious'



The
Guardian

Grace Dent

'One of those dinners where, by the midway point, you're already making plans to come back'



PHOTOGRAPHS: MARIA BELL FOR THE GUARDIAN



It's telling that London is now so over-furnished with fancy new restaurants that it can be incredibly tough to lure the capital's diners to unfamiliar postcodes. Or, in the case of Allegra in Stratford, at the edge of the former Olympic Park, it's a little like herding fog. Allegra is just six brief minutes by rail from King's Cross St Pancras - just take the Javelin train one stop through the extra-fast Scooby-Doo tunnel (heck, the trip is even kind of fun), and Allegra, or, more accurately, the new skyscraper in which it lives, is the first thing you'll spot as you exit Stratford International station. Don't question why this

station is called "international" when the line goes no farther than Kent; that's another story.

"But Stratford feels such a long way from Islington," many have whined, as if I'd suggested they lambada the Camino to Santiago while wearing jelly shoes. Londoners will rarely trek right across the capital for dinner. Many will, however, fly to Lisbon for the weekend to eat bacalhau à brás. I am but a conduit of this madness.

Allegra's second frontier, in luring said diners, is that it's sort of part of The Stratford, a hulking new, multi-floored lifestyle project containing a 145-bedroom hotel,

Allegra

Food



Atmosphere



Service



The Stratford, 20 International Way, Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, London E20, 020-3973 0545. Lunch, Tue-Sun, noon-2.30pm (3pm Sat, 4pm Sun), dinner Tue-Sat, 6-10.30pm. About £60 a head, plus drinks & service

a casual brasserie, a cocktail bar, rental apartments, sky gardens and so on, the sky being the limit and all that. This very much clutters the message that chef Patrick Powell, formerly of Chiltern Firehouse, Wild Honey and Dublin's L'Ecrivain, is doing something quite separate and - I'll lay my cards on the table now - really quite magical up on the seventh floor. He's making smoked eel pithivier (if you're too bone idle to look that up, it's a fancy, boob-shaped pasty) and barbecued chicken wings with parmesan dumplings. And wild venison loin on roasted celeriac, and a sharing platter of heritage rib-eye with onion tarte tatin.

Ignore the publicity photos, which suggest that Allegra is serving wearisome bowls of petals and shavings in clear broth, and which hammer home the information that Allegra's designers had a hand in Noma, too. Everything about this new-ish restaurant's messaging hints that it is sterile and Scandic, with a retro whiff of 80s yuppie. What is actually happening up on that seventh floor, however,



is that a brilliant Irish chef is making elegant yet hearty, jolly and wholly delicious dinners.

Yes, it is all quite taupe, beige and far from the West End, but the service is upbeat and flawless, and once there are a few dozen people sat along the pretty bar drinking cocktails, I prefer it very much to Chiltern Firehouse, which was always Dante's hidden level of hell. Nobody went to Chiltern for the food; they went to feign interest in food while creep-shotting Jude Law eating crab doughnuts.

Allegra's food, on the other hand, is the whole point of the schlep. This is food that seeks to make you fat, and hooray for that. Artichoke velouté with shaved chestnuts arrives with a heavenly brioche. The soda bread, incidentally, is the most sumptuous in London, and comes with a green sauce, a sort of salsa verde by way of Killlala, Co. Mayo. That venison loin, which Charles raved about, came with an extra mini-cottage pie made from the deer's braised shoulder. One dish I've thought of many times since my visit was a side of pink fir apple potatoes with chives and sweet-and-sour onion. Yes, it was

Grace notes



The yoga fire vegan curry at Cook Daily in Market Halls, London (above): calling semi-raw curried veg 'fire' is radical honesty.

The Fellpack in Keswick, Cumbria, is a regular hang-out for the Dent clan. It's a place for climbers, or those, like me, who prefer to hear about it over lentil and bean chilli and local Fell Cider.

The new Lina Stores in King's Cross: awful service, forgettable food - 4/10. See me.

@gracedent

just a plain old plate of new potatoes and onion, but at the same time it was also an orgasmic hit of pickle vinegar, soft spud and creamy, crunchy caramelised onion ring.

We ranged across the menu, eating one of those dinners where by the midway point we were already making plans about when to come back. Because what is the pain perdu with confit egg and wild mushrooms? And shouldn't we try the turbot cooked in sake with congee? A main of perfectly judged monkfish with sweet crown prince pumpkin, shiitake and glazed pumpkin seeds was as pretty as it was adorable. I ate a slice of sticky, warm treacle cake for pudding with a highly likable caramelised pastry ice-cream. There was a confit apple millefeuille with salted caramel that my stomach pleaded with my eyes to order just to take home for bedtime snacking.

Allegra and Tom Brown's Cornerstone are two incredibly good reasons to discover less-travelled east London. If you can't be bothered, it's your loss, because there are literally millions of us over here, and we'll just eat all the pain perdu ourselves.