

THE GASTRONOMY GAME

WHEN MOST PUBS ARE GASTROPUBS, RESTAURANTS HAVE TO BE CREATIVE TO HAVE IMPACT. GISELLE WHITEAKER FINDS CUISINE THAT IS A CUT ABOVE.



In 2011, 20 years after restaurateurs Michael Belben and David Eyre took over a London pub called The Eagle and turned it into what is credited as the first gastropub, *The Good Food Guide* banned the word “gastropub” from all future editions. They felt it was overused.

Today, the use of the G-word has undoubtedly caught up with *The Good Food Guide*'s sentiments. The British dining scene is packed with gastropubs, which in turn, are packed with punters. Everyday food has been bumped up a notch, making it harder for restaurants to stand out, unless they have a Michelin star.

If you know where to look, however, there are eateries upping the gastronomy game. Take Southam Street, the sister restaurant to 108 Garage, which is three minutes down the road in North Kensington. 108 Garage threw its doors open last year with no publicity and quickly became a go-to spot for foodies in the know. Southam Street looks set to follow in its footsteps.



From the outside, the three-storeyed former Victorian pub at the foot of Erno Goldfinger's Brutalist, 1970's era Trellick Tower gives nothing away. My friend Russell and I nearly miss it, noticing the subtle signage above the door on the street corner in the nick of time. Inside, the ground-level is a temple to grilling. An open kitchen and marble bar counter fills the centre of the spacious dining area, and it's bustling.

On the first floor, Raw – just across from a cosy saké bar – is somewhat more sedate, although voices drift in from the terrace, where diners are making the most of the balmy evening. We take a seat in front of what was likely once a fireplace. From this vantage point we can see three chefs behind the counter working their magic. The décor here is a mishmash of modern pub meets Asia, with rattan ceiling drapes, a curved feature wall of jungle wallpaper, and a fabulous spindly modern chandelier that looks like it has been crafted from kitchen pots.

“A drink to start?” asks COO and partner of the group Juan Rafael Bosc, recommending the sparkling saké, a tippie that is fast gaining popularity. The sweet fizz has none of the rough edges of regular rice wine – and a lower alcohol content – tasting more like Prosecco, with a mild saké nose. It's dangerously moreish.



FROM TOP DOWN Smoked duck breast; cobia ceviche; steam bao buns.

We pour over the menu, an intriguing blend of Asian and Peruvian influences, with raw dishes on one side and grill on the other. The flavour combinations see worlds collide: Argentine shrimp with British caviar; Scottish scallops with brown butter ponzu; smoked duck breast with a vibrant mango salsa.

“What do you recommend?” I ask Juan. His face lights up when he talks about the Iberico pluma, a cut of meat taken from the neck of the Iberian Black Hoofed pig, so we add that to our list. Juan writes nothing down, but when I profess scepticism of him remembering all seven items, he reels them off without pausing, in the order they'll be served.

We start with sweet potato and cassava chips with yuzu avocado, from the “Nibbles” section. The sweetness of the former with the saltiness of the latter pairs beautifully with the tangy yuzu in the creamy avocado to create umami, the “fifth taste”. This leads onto the double salmon sushi roll with pickled cucumber and kimchi spicy sauce, topped with thinly grated, deep-fried sweet potato for crunch. Next is our two sushi selections: aburi Seabream with truffle miso powder and seared Chu-Toro (medium fatty tuna) with a spicy chimichurri salsa. “They all melt in the mouth,” says Russell. “There's no chewing required. It's been a long time since I've had sushi like this.” Our final raw dish is cobia ceviche, the folds of fish sitting on a bed of black quinoa, flanked by splashes of tomato and basil tiger milk. It's a colourful palette that tastes as good as it looks.

When the steamed bao buns arrive, packed with spiced fried chicken and kimchi, we set our chopsticks aside and dive in with our fingers. We'd considered sharing just one, but when I bite into the soft, white bun and crispy chicken, I'm glad we didn't. Some food is too good to share.

The pluma, looking more like lamb than pork, and Russell's choice of baby back ribs in a sticky chipotle miso arrive at the same time, along with a side of grilled asparagus. The deep smoky flavour of the pluma elicits groans of pleasure and we cleanse our palates with pickled nashi (Asian pear), which trounces the pickled ginger found in standard



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP The ground floor of Southam Street; two of the chefs at Raw; beef picanha.

Japanese cuisine. We're back on hands for the ribs, the earthy miso tempered by fresh lime, with just enough spice to make our lips tingle. It's all I can do not to lick my fingers.

For dessert, we tuck into a divine gooey-centred chocolate moelleux with smooth green tea ice cream. Juan also recommends the fresh strawberry *chawan mushi*, which he describes as “Japanese egg custard without the egg.” It's smooth and light, topped with an artistic display of berries and cashew and sesame crunch.

“Those ribs ...and the pluma...” says Russell as we prepare to leave. We both lick our tingling lips. Gastropubs may be on every corner, but not this one. Southam Street is a cut above, fusing inspiring flavours into every bite.



To book a table at Southam Street, see www.southamstreet.com

