# The Kolossi/Attica, London: ‘It’s not revelatory, it’s much better than that’ – restaurant review

They say you can’t revisit past times, but at this much-loved old haunt, it’s not quite true

**[The Kolossi/Attica](https://thekolossi.com/), 50-60 Rosebery Avenue, London EC1R 4RR. Small plates, starters £3.80-£9.80, larger dishes £15.80-£21.50, desserts £7.50, wines from £27**

Let’s pull back the velvet curtain on this restaurant reviewing lark. Because readers of the Observer and our daily sibling, the Guardian, would be unimpressed if both myself and the saintly [Grace Dent](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/gracedent) reviewed the same restaurants, we quietly co-ordinate what we are going to write about. I let a Guardian colleague know where I’m planning to go and they return the compliment. Mostly these emails contain just the name of a restaurant from one side and a reply with the single word “yours” from the other.

When I emailed to say I was planning to review [the Kolossi grill](https://thekolossi.com/menu) on Rosebery Avenue in London’s Clerkenwell, my famously lugubrious colleague’s response was the word “blimey” followed by a sentence questioning the sanity of everyone involved. I understood why. The Kolossi first opened in 1966, a short stumble from what in [1976](https://www.theguardian.com/gnm-archive/2002/jun/11/1) became the Guardian and later the Observer’s home, until 2008. It has a kitsch Palladian frontage, as if it were a Poundland offshoot of the Acropolis. It would be unfair to say it was actively bad. It was part of a generation of mostly Greek Cypriot restaurants scattered across the UK that offered a narrow, reliably robust version of the Greek repertoire.

For the newspapers’ staff, however, the Kolossi’s greatest virtue was simply that it was there. You went there after the pub, guided by instinct. With the searing wit of headline writers everywhere, it was nicknamed the Colossal Bill, perhaps in celebration of its cheapness. Or it was called something else, which was hilariously funny in 1992 and really isn’t now. Back then the walls were panelled in orange-varnished wood. There was plastic ivy dangling from the beamed ceiling and, on occasion, a belly dancer. A paid one, not a subeditor who had got carried away, two bottles of caustic retsina to the bad. Although that might have happened. It could all get very messy. The lovely staff were forgiving.

So no, not an obvious candidate for the once over. But then I learned that the owners these past 34 years had moved on. The lease had been taken over by a businessman named David Lonsdale, who is involved with the nearby [Sekforde](https://www.thesekforde.com/). He had restored that Georgian pub to its former glory. Now he was doing the same with the Kolossi. I checked out the menu, which used to be long. It is now short and to the point and rather attractive.

So here I am once more, clambering out of a cab at the scene of so many lost nights. The faux Palladian façade is still in place, but it has been repainted from a light olive green to a deep Aegean blue. And hang on. What’s this? The name seems to have changed. It is now called Attica, presumably after the Greek peninsula. Although at the time of writing it’s still called the Kolossi on its website and elsewhere online. We’re modern. We can handle this two names thing. Inside, the wood panelling has been stripped and repainted in shades of cream. The plastic ivy on the ceiling has been replaced by a fairy-lit canopy of twigs. The paper tablecloths have gone. It’s now all solid marble.

But it’s still that room. It’s still that place where I remember putting the world to rights and filling up my glass again mid-anecdote, even though I knew I’d pay for it the next morning, and then filling the glass once more. I can still hear the echoes of when it operated as an unofficial club room for a bunch of people with a shared endeavour. In those spaces the quality of the cooking matters far less than the fact that you have all chosen to sit in it together.

And then the food started to arrive and I knew we were somewhere else entirely. Once upon a time restaurants like the original Kolossi were the only place you’d find tarama and it would be bright pink and grainy and acidic. Now it’s become a part of menus in so many other ambitious restaurants, as a mark of good taste. The bar has been raised. This version, from the short list of dips with which the menu opens, is a match for any of them. It’s whipped and frothy and comes dressed with a shiny puddle of olive oil, lots of chopped dill and a single salty kalamata olive. The accompanying pitta is warm and soft and oil-slicked. There are deep-fried zucchini balls, creamy inside and crisp outside, with a coarse and garlicky tzatziki. There are three fat prawns “saganaki” – baked with olive oil, feta, oregano and the sweetest of cherry tomatoes now bursting from their skins. Hold back some of the pitta for mopping duties.

The choice of larger dishes is concise: three seafood dishes, a few souvlaki and a couple of baked things, including moussaka. A skewer of lamb souvlaki brings salty, charred meat that has clearly been grilled at speed to save it from being ruined, with a rugged salad and a dish of a lemony tahini dressing. A fat fillet of seabass, its skin crisped, slouches louchely on a bed of nutty new potatoes with its own lemon-boosted sauce. Only a Cretan salad, made with hefty chunks of barley rusk, is a little heavy-going. It may well be exactly as it’s meant to be. In which case what it’s meant to be turns out to be a little heavy-going.

This is not cooking that redefines the very notion of Greek food. It’s not revelatory. It’s so much better than that. It’s the essentials done with due care and attention. Service is run by one lovely bearded man from Athens, who doesn’t miss a beat and seems delighted to see his customers enjoying themselves. In the half-open kitchen, there’s one older chap, grilling the meats and dribbling the olive oil in all the right places. Desserts are syrup-drenched pastries with a scoop of mastic ice-cream, with that slightly bouncy, rubbery texture, familiar to anyone who has ever bought a cornet in the hottest of climes. We have a slab of soft, fragrant orange cake and another made with walnuts. The short, entirely Greek wine list, currently boasting just one retsina, helps it all on its way. The Kolossi Grill AKA Attica grill is that rare thing; a venerable restaurant that has found a way to avoid decline and start afresh. I used to know you very well, old friend. I look forward to getting to know you all over again.