# Block Soho, London: ‘A dreadfully disappointing, poor-value experience’ – restaurant review

The new kids on this block promise ‘good times’. If only it were true

[**Block Soho**](https://www.blocksoho.com/)**, Clarion House, 2 Saint Anne’s Court, London W1F 0AZ (020 3376 9999). Starters £9-£17, Sunday lunch £15-£26, desserts £9, wines from £27**

Hung on the wall above the urinal at Block Soho was a promotional poster for the Sunday lunch I had recently completed. It bore the slogan: “Whole joints, big flames, good times.” Finally I felt as if I was being looked after. Because if there’s one thing I can use, it’s clear criteria by which to judge a restaurant. So, let’s start in the middle. Once upon a time there were indeed big flames at this site. It’s a wide, low-slung space on a pedestrianised alleyway between Wardour and Dean Streets in London’s Soho. Over the years it has been many things: American deli, tapas bar, Dante’s seventh circle of vodka-drenched hell.

In 2015, the company behind both the steak restaurant Goodman and the hilarious luxe steak and seafood joint Beast turned it into a great-value seafood place called [Rex and Mariano](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/feb/01/rex-and-mariano-restaurant-review-jay-rayner), but apparently there weren’t enough people in London wanting slurpy, salty clams at £6 a go, because Londoners are idiots. Instead, it became [Zelman Meats](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/jan/10/zelman-meats-restaurant-review-jay-rayner), named after the owner Mikhail Zelman. They did a small number of things – steaks, slow-roasted short rib, grilled oysters – really well. I recall a terrific Sunday lunch, with irregular Yorkshires the size of sombreros, crisp, dark-hued roasties and slices of what I referred to then as taffeta-pink slices of beef.

To cook their steaks, they built a huge charcoal grill into the open kitchen and, when the animal fats dripped, the flames really did become very big indeed; so much so that they erected a transparent protective screen to protect people sitting at the counter edging the kitchen from third-degree burns. They’d sit transfixed as if nose to nose with a caged wild animal. In a way, they were.

Zelman’s closed during lockdown, but little has been done to the space since the new owners arrived, bar some expensive branding on the walls. They have retained the circular marble trough just inside the door along with the booths and high-tops. Sadly, though, it seems the caged animal has been released. If there are big flames in this new restaurant, they’re not in the open kitchen this Sunday lunchtime. It contains just two hassled-looking cooks. The grill is unlit.

Which brings me to the promise of “whole joints”. At Block Soho on Sundays there’s a choice of pork, lamb or beef. The latter arrives in slices. If those slices came off whole joints, I would expect them to be pink, which is exactly what they prepared for our photographer at a later date. Instead, ours had been seared on all sides like minute steaks. We should take their word for it that ours came from a single joint. But then why sear it? Not that it makes much difference: it’s a tough, extremely indifferent piece of meat. The pork is wet and dreary and comes without crackling, which I regard as a personal insult. The lamb is a wintery shade of grey as, at times, am I. These three dishes with sides cost between £21 and £24 for three slices. You can have one of all three, but that will cost you £26 for exactly the same amount of meat. The menu also offers “Roasts – fresh from the sea”. Apparently, the fish didn’t fancy it and stayed there. They have no fish, unlike the chippie across the alley which has loads.

The meat dishes come with stodgy, strikingly uniform Yorkshires. God’s own country might see this as cause for a defamation suit. There are dense, pallid roast potatoes the colour of disappointment, and “charred” batons of root vegetable that are undercooked and present little evidence of charring. This is unsurprising given the apparent lack of flames with which to char them. Let’s hear it, then, for the pleasing buttered cabbage. Let’s also hear it for what they call “block gravy”. It makes me wonder what sort of block was involved. It’s thick and sludgy and bears a striking resemblance to something I once made from a packet at home, for shits and giggles. This is remarkable, given they must have made it from scratch.

Before that there is, well, food. I keep looking at the photo on my phone of the “pulled” pork on sourdough toast in thick apple gravy; it looks chopped, which is a different thing entirely. The non-meat option of creamed chargrilled celeriac is under-seasoned. There is a miserly portion of beef carpaccio with bluntly shaved parmesan, but disguised nicely by squiggles from a squeezy bottle of thick balsamic dressing. The best option is the English seafood cocktail of prawns and crayfish, as it should be at £17.

Interestingly, for a restaurant promoting their Sunday lunch offering, the one dessert they don’t have today is the apple crumble. Perhaps they didn’t get their crumble deliveries. A dark chocolate tart has a hefty filling and soft, damp pastry. I ask if they make it on site. They say they do. Nice that they’ve taken responsibility. The cream in a seasonal fruit mess has been overwhipped and is split. We hunt through the clumping globules of dairy fat for the promised meringue, but eventually call off the search, exhausted. It’s true that restaurants often find domestic food rituals like Sunday lunch hard to pull off. Zelman Meats managed a good one; this, however, was described by one of my companions as the sort of thing you’d be served in an underachieving pub smelling of wet dog, for £6.95. As that companion is my wife I’m not going to argue.

What drives me nuts is that significant amounts of money have been spent here on branding and sloganising; on creating the idea of a cool restaurant. But just saying stuff doesn’t make it so, if you don’t also invest in good ingredients and people able to prepare them adequately. For reference, during the rest of the week there’s a menu of salt-aged steak cuts, but don’t hope for bargains. The ribeye here is 47% more expensive per 100g than at Hawksmoor, the rump is 33% more expensive and the fillet 31% more expensive.

Credit must go to the front-of-house staff who deliver this dreadfully disappointing, poor-value experience with charm and efficiency. Sadly, charm and efficiency will only get you so far. For here I am stood in the bog, staring at the words “good times” on the poster in front of me, thinking, “I really could have done with some of those.” It’s time to zip up and go home.