# Walter’s, London: ‘So many reasons to go back’ – restaurant review

Nothing can beat a really good local restaurant, and this one in West Dulwich is a little beauty

[**Walter’s**](https://waltersdulwich.co.uk/)**, 84 Park Hall Road, London SE21 8BW (020 8014 8548). Snacks £3.80-£5, starters £9.50-£13, mains £19.50-£26, desserts £7-£7.50, wines from £19.50**

It was when they started playing the original recording of Love Will Tear Us Apart by Joy Division that I knew I was in the right place. We’d already had the soundtracks of both The Breakfast Club and Pretty in Pink. Now it was time for a bit of melancholy post-punk with our dinner. That’s the key to a good neighbourhood restaurant. You’ve got to know the neighbourhood. The team behind [Walter’s](https://waltersdulwich.co.uk/), recently opened amid the privet and spreading horse chestnut of London’s West Dulwich, clearly do.

For here we all are, the comfortably paunchy middle-aged who were kids in the 80s and danced and snogged to these tunes, and who can still get a bit misty-eyed over a few bars of Don’t You (Forget About Me) by Simple Minds. Alongside these memories, played out at the dullest roar, we want a nice, creative bit of dinner without schlepping into town, and we are ready to pay properly for it if the cooking’s good and the portions don’t make you feel like a mug. At Walter’s the portions don’t make you feel like a mug. A restaurant like this will not survive on special occasions. It will only work if people keep coming back; if they store it away as a reliable promise, kept. Walter’s is that place.

It’s also an intriguing case study in the post-pandemic hospitality business. Walter’s is named after Walter Hathaway, a milliner who was the first owner of this address. It belongs to Rob Hampton and Matt Lovell, the restaurateurs behind the [Oystermen](https://www.theguardian.com/food/2019/oct/21/ofm-awards-2019-best-restaurant-the-oystermen-london) in Covent Garden. As the latter’s name suggests, it’s a straight-up seafood restaurant, serving uncomplicated platefuls of the good stuff from British waters; a central London bistro with relatively restrained pricing. It’s been a solid success and the reasonable assumption is that they would find a site for a follow-up, somewhere else firmly in Zone 1.

Instead, here they are in the especially leafy suburbs with a totally different bistro proposition. As the pandemic lay waste to the restaurant sector, sage types suggested that all the hot action would shift from the city centres to the neighbourhoods that ring them; places exactly like this. There are still a lot of businesses taking advantage of some beneficial post-Covid leases, but if it also means the likes of Hampton and Lovell try their hands here instead, on the site of what was a Café Rouge I never visited, then I’m all for it.

Because tonight, after recent reviews in Edinburgh and Swansea, Taunton and Dublin, I have simply followed the No 3 bus route 10 minutes from my south London home, to this clean-lined, half wood-panelled space, cleverly divided by rattan screens. I have a very well made, very cold margarita to drink, and a plate of fried friggitelli peppers to pick at, alongside some expertly engineered truffled arancini, while I make my choices.

There’s nothing especially startling about the offer here. It’s food to oil conversation rather than become the focus of it; the sort of thing anybody who has eaten in a few restaurants over the past decade will recognise. There are four of us tonight and only five starters so we order them all. Yes please, we’ll have the duck liver parfait for the table, because the table is hungry, thank you very much. It’s glossy and rich and extremely well made, as you would expect of a kitchen led by Mateusz Gosek who has had time in significant kitchens on his CV.

There are mussels in a brisk chilli broth, and hunks of braised cuttlefish in a mess of tomatoes, chorizo and chickpeas. There’s a shimmering ceviche of gilt-head bream, and a salad of tomatoes and nectarines with croutons, which is billed as a panzanella but isn’t really. It is pleasing all the same. It’s a table of “How’s yours?” and “Very nice, would you like to try some?” and “Yes please.” There’s attention to detail: the tiny balls of cucumber with the ceviche; the way the nectarines are fanned; the skinning and then pickling of the cherry tomatoes with the parfait.

Main courses justify their £20-plus price tags by both execution and volume. Perhaps they’re doing themselves out of dessert orders by piling just so much glossy, velvet-red peperonata beneath that slab of crisp-skinned sea bass. And, my, that’s a fair old heap of braised lentils beneath the sizeable roasted guinea fowl. They haven’t skimped on the crushed new potatoes with the lamb rump either. Tonight, there’s a special of poussin, thickly coated in a hefty sate sauce with a proper hobnailed chilli kick, then grilled; a smart move, given how little flavour poussin brings to the party.

If there’s a criticism, it’s that non-meat dishes are clearly not front and centre of anybody’s thoughts. If the main course offering pulls on the old Italian vegetarian fallbacks – a risotto say, or a pasta or, as here, a plate of gnocchi – you just know nobody is really with the project. It doesn’t matter how good those gnocchi are. They could do, they should do, better. Very much on the plus side, there’s a broad wine list that, on its first page, features two wines of the week discounted by roughly 25%. This may be because they really like the wine, or they simply bought too much and it’s not moving. But I’m a sucker for this stuff either way. A brisk bright fiano from Villa Raiano is reduced from £38 to £28; an earthy La Bioca nebbiolo is reduced from £47 to £35.25.

It’s the sort of thing that will bring us back, as will the charming service. At one point our waiter overhears us discussing a much-loved but long-gone local café in Herne Hill. “Oh my,” he says. “My first job in restaurants was there. I was the kitchen porter.” It’s a small thing, but it’s also the very definition of neighbourhood. Desserts are designed for those who have made it through the mains. A lemon posset has failed to set, but I discover a taste for drinking citrussy custard. There’s a more successfully solid wedge of Basque cheesecake and a few of their ice-creams: a dollop of Eton mess, with cubes of meringue and a properly sprightly scoop of cherry. I note on the way out that they do brunch at weekends. Oh, and there’s a happy hour. You can also just come for a drink. There’s lots of reasons to go back. Given how dangerously close to my home it is, the odds of that happening are high.