

REVIEW

William Sitwell reviews The Princess Royal, London: 'There is a fabulous bustle'

★★★★☆ 3/5

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By William Sitwell
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In brief | The Princess Royal



Address: 7 Hereford Rd, W2 5AH

Price: Lunch for two: £156.50 excluding drinks and service

Website: cubitthouse.co.uk/the-princess-royal/

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Years ago it was the Slug and Lettuce. I would frequent with my friend Natasha – the most beautiful girl on our street in Notting Hill – to plot our future take-over of the world. We'd also go to the Tiroler Hut (think subterranean Austrian fare and an old man playing cowbells), had curries at The Standard Indian and bought cheap stuffed ravioli and taramasalata at the 7/Eleven.

Now, where once there were cinemas, Greek delis, petrol stations and haberdashers are perfumeries, apartment blocks, nail salons and posh furniture stores. The Westbourne Grove bit of Notting Hill, on the edge of Bayswater, is elite and bijou.

And now, in the site's latest incarnation – and there have been several since the late '80s when it was my patch – there is The Princess Royal. It's a restaurant and bar with gazillions plundered on the interior, a large conservatory, a huge bar with an island in the middle adorned with Champagne and seafood on ice, several smaller spaces – which they call 'private feasting rooms' – and at the back a bustling dining room. The place has morphed so much from its Victorian beginnings that to call it a pub stretches the definition to breaking point.

And there are seasoned restaurateurs and chefs behind it: a business called Cubitt House with a portfolio of other swanky former boozers in the richest neighbourhoods of the metropolis. So they know what they're doing, can dress brilliant staff in smart aprons, and craft exciting-looking menus with oysters and grilled platters and sumptuous puddings and an intelligent wine list.

I was with my shouty friend Farhad, still talking of himself in the third person: 'Farhad has come from the airport and needs an expensive beer,' he yelled before smothering me in Persian/American kisses and rubbing my cheeks raw with his sandpaper stubble.

No extortionate German pint of Stiegl Weisse lager for me, instead a gorgeous Greek assyrtiko Ariousia Chora, perfect in minerality and freshness and a dream with some padrón peppers that were good but with no char. I like a few flecks of char on my padróns, a little gusto from the chef, a courageous flame.

But there was melting, oily, well-seasoned and orangey heaven provided by a plate of red prawn crudo and half a dozen oysters adding gaiety to our table. There is a fabulous bustle to this room as it heaves and we loved being a part of it.

Another dish to share of smoked anchovies was an enjoyable mess of salt and eggs, shallots and crisp bread, all perfect for his beer and my wine. Then came my T-bone. Apparently. Not that I could see it, covered, as it was, in a vast pile of stringy vegetation. Was it a sort of lettuce or dandelion? It was like a man trap, lingering, long undetected in the deep forest with a dead animal hidden below.

I picked aside the forest floor and found some excellent beef underneath. There was more foliage in a plate of purple sprouting broccoli that was so tough we enforced a reverse ferret and it was sent packing back to the kitchen. A second attempt was vastly improved. Farhad fared better with his beautifully cooked wild bream, but he then went mad ordering doughnuts with lemon curd. Done perfectly, I suppose, but to me horribly sweet fast-food terrors. My more conventional rice pudding brûlée was a similarly over-sugared assault.

'I'm reviewing The Princess Royal,' I told my old pal Natasha. 'Really?' she responded. 'Can't you give it a rest? She's the hardest-working member of that poor family...'