



EATING OUT

The Princess Royal review: 'Elegant and beautiful... full of sprawl and splendour'

'All the nice people are on a boat in the Med. It's all lobster-spearing, barbecues, massive orgies in the shallows..'

Giles Coren | Thursday August 04 2022, 12:01am, The Times

It's high summer. The dog days. The pits of the world. The roasting city with its dusty rubbish smells, widdle-stained pavements and topless hooligan children on scooters wearing their T-shirts round their necks (Is that a gangster thing or are they just embarrassed of spotty shoulders?) is no place for nice people. Not now, with global warming (because you simply refused to go vegan, couldn't bear to miss out on even a single steak) driving temperatures towards something in line with the benighted conurbations of the southern Mediterranean (or Venus), cities where all the smart people leave for the whole of August. And most of July, if they have any sense.

And, indeed, most of the nice people have gone from here too. Off to stay at their family's sprawling *castello* in Tuscany ("It's all v caj; nan-nan and gan-gan love looking after the children so we just loll in the shade with our friends and eat huge meals at long tables in the orange grove - they've got this darling couple, Vaginelda and Arsolio, who are the most wonderful Italian cooks . . ."), or on boats in the Mediterranean ("The kids swim all day while we go lobster-spearing with Zeus and Prometheus, then cook it up on the beach on a brushwood barbecue with ice cold assyrtiko straight from the bottle - there's a wonderful little producer, Domestos, who is godfather to our youngest - and then we have a massive sex orgy in the shallows . . ."), or some Regency manor house in Rock or Newquay ("We take the same place every year with a load of uni pals on Biffer Spodrinton's family estate. It's just along the coast from the big house, you don't see the children from dawn till dusk, and at night it's just party, party, party . . .") . . . and I hate them all!



Prosciutto di San Daniele, Sicilian melon and Aleppo pepper

Because I'm still here. And so are you. Obviously you are, because you're reading *The Times* on a Saturday morning. Unless you're reading it on your phone or something at Club 55 in St Trop or on Simon Cowell's yacht or bobbing in the infinity pool at your ancient Ibiza finca in "the nice part of the island", waiting for old Pedro the *pescador* to bring you the crabs you ordered for lunch, in which case you can just sod off and post some more pictures on Instagram for me to vomit over from my hot, dead garden in north London, with next door's builders still angle-grinding their way to Australia after two years (What are they doing? It took less time to build Versailles!), occasionally shuffling miserably up to the Hampstead ponds for a swim in the boiling green slime with a thousand screaming teenagers or maybe dragging myself up to the high street for a Cornetto at Londis.

God, I hate the summer holidays. Always have. Even if you do get away for a bit (we've got a week in Wales at some point, which will take three days to get to on the jammed, roasting motorways and where my children will then probably drown), you're still stuck at home most of the time, just working, being hot, listening to the sturm und drang of the builders, wishing the winter would come so all these bloody young people having fun in the parks with their picnics would be pummelled back indoors by freezing rain, and all your bastard friends, who seem to be able to go away for the whole eight weeks (where do they go? Don't they have jobs?), will have to come back to their boring London lives.

In such situations, there is only one thing for it: go to the pub. Specifically one with a garden - which they basically all have now, since the smoking ban and then lockdown, even if it's just a patch of tarmac by the bins with a tarpaulin thrown up on some broom handles for shade - and get a bottle of wine and a big glass and put a lot of ice in it and try to forget.



Although, to be fair, the Princess Royal in Westbourne Grove is a fair bit nicer than that. At least since the Cubitt House group bought it and put Sam and Georgie Pearman in charge and dragged the great Ben Tish out of Norma in Charlotte Street and put him in the kitchen. I don't know what it was like before (I don't get to pubs out this way much as east-west public transport in London is rubbish, I don't drive drunk and sitting in taxis brings me out in hives) but it is now one of the most magnificent, sprawling, elegant and beautiful pubs imaginable, with big gardens at front and back, full of climbing plants and rosemary bushes, ancient olive trees, fresh summer breezes, lovely cast iron furniture, plush red and white upholstery and dappled sunlight, and then still plenty of forest greens inside, and deep reds again, and endless plants in the big conservatory, the dining rooms and the bar at the front. In its sprawl and splendour, which is in no way at odds with the cosiness and integrity of the individual spaces, it reminds me of the excellent Double Red Duke in Clanfield, Oxfordshire ([reviewed here](#) about a year ago), which Sam and Georgie still own and run, separate from the Cubitt group, I believe, as they do the Swan at Ascott-under-Wychwood ([reviewed here](#) about three years ago), although I think they're letting go of the legendary Chequers in Churchill. Busy bees, anyway.

I've been twice now. The first time was with my cousin Linda, who got me so bladdered on Corton-Charlemagne (she's done okay, has Linda) that I only dimly remember a terrific meal of raw red prawns with rosemary and orange (£17) and oysters (£4 each) served with hot chorizo from the raw bar, smoked anchovies on toast (£9.50), lots of excellent fish and an inexplicably ordered (because greed is such an ugly sin) massive great sourdough cheese and ham toastie slathered with summer truffle (which I can't now find on their menu so may have imagined). Oh, and the whole grilled bream (£34) with "bottarga butter", which was a new one on me and a wholly felicitous coming together of my two favourite things in the world (not counting my children, who would be no good at all whipped with air-dried grey mullet roe).

The second time was with Esther, very much looking to dispel the summertime London blues described earlier and also to check what the place was like sober. And the answer is... still great. Friendly faces from the first visit, who recognised me slightly better than I did them, reminded me what great, professional and fun-loving service there is here, and how cool and fresh the outdoor spaces are (for by this second trip we were in full-on, 35-degree heatwave).



Panacotta, marsala and blood orange

Esther had the dressed Cornish crab in the shell (£17), with the brilliant addition of radishes and raw early peas and a scatter of pangrattato, and I had a grilled artichoke salad (£13) with wild rocket (robust and peppery), smoked anchovies and spelt. Then there was a slow-cooked (so nicely juicy) chicken salad (£14) with grilled Little Gem, parmesan, croutons and stuff, and a rare pub outing for that 1970s trattoria classic, the melanzane parmigiana, here redubbed "Princess Parmigiana" (like an Italian Disney heroine) and really, really good: thick and rich and creamy-crispy in its steel oval bowl, full of summery Mediterranean aromatics, and easily big enough for two to share, which at £18 would be a pretty cheap date.

Best of all was a monkfish T-bone (£28), fiercely grilled (presumably on the Jospier) so that the back of the bone was blackened and meaty but the rest of the flesh was all juice and sweetness, served on fat borlotti beans with mussels and fresh red chilli and a square of toast underneath to soak up all the garlicky juices, and a salsa verde over the top. A really top-class dish.

The cocktails are brilliant too (we had a grapefruit margarita and a white port and tonic thing whose name I can't remember), and there were at least three rosés by the glass, including the delicious but quite pricey Château Léoube (a habit Sam and Georgie will have picked up in Oxfordshire, home of Léoube's proprietors, the Bamford family) and two cheaper but equally delicious marques.

I mean, to be honest, the food and wine are all so much better than you're going to get anywhere in Europe, the staff are so much nicer and the Uber home so much quicker, cheaper, less carbon-murderous and, frankly, more likely to actually happen than an aeroplane flight, it's almost enough to make you feel sorry for all the poor bastards who skedaddled in mid-July.

Almost.

The Princess Royal

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Cooking 8

Service 9

Vibes 10

Score 9