

Old Tom & English, restaurant review: Soho's latest white-hot spot bucks the no-reservations trend in exclusive style

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There they are, loitering on the pavement outside a firmly closed, discreet door. The couple hunching over their smartphones, glancing up at the large brass bell. It takes me back (well, apart from the phones) to late nights in Soho and all-night hidden drinking dens that were hard to get into – and even harder to get out of.

These two might be in the heart of Soho, but what they're hoping to access is not a dive bar but a restaurant. The snag is that Old Tom & English, for this is where we meet them, is an entry-by-invitation, reservations-only place. I've snagged two seats but am told they're likely to be at the bar – the intimation is that a week in, the place is white-hot.

So when the doorperson lets us in, I experience an unseemly flush of smugness. But what's this? She lets them in too and the five of us are sardined into a ground-floor hall, all looking and feeling a bit uncomfortable. Well, really, and

after they'd made a big thing about it being "reservations only", unlike everywhere else in town... *Inwardly huffs, stamps foot*

Once downstairs I feel a bit more bonhomie – the low-ceilinged rooms are a good combination of icily chic and cosy. Marble panelling and accessories, mid-century chairs and cabinets and 1960s art all tick the cool box, while comfortable sofas and supremely flattering lighting welcome me in.

The décor should be no surprise: the designer is Lee Broom, who has a keen eye for beautiful detail and whose products – from cut-crystal lightbulbs to chairs trimmed in neon – are desirable statement pieces (I go home wondering how I can get the circular marble fireplace from Old Tom in my home). He's been well briefed by brother and sister owners Maria and Costas Constantinou – also owners of the Arts Theatre Club elsewhere in Soho – who are in evidence when I visit, beetling about making sure everyone's happy.

I certainly am. I'd gone in expecting "fashion" and it remained that way until I taste the first dish (small plates, natch). Nibbles include popcorn cockles and there's crispy fish skin, and kale. As Chandler Bing might have said, if he wore a Play by Commes des Garçons top and Norse Project jeans, "Could this place be any more 2014?"

But it's the standards on this British-themed menu that stand out. Triple-cooked chips with a pot of heavy mayonnaise might be the best I've had anywhere, any year. Pan-fried king scallops with black pudding and a courgette purée seizes back a dish from MasterChef shame, and crispy pig cheek with cider apple and fennel is a joyous cylinder of crunch with very, very melty meat inside. The sauce is piquant and lovely.

Smoked wood pigeon with beetroot, pine nuts and samphire is my least favourite, as the plate has a watery pool of blood-like liquid (sauce it ain't) and the flavours don't marry. Egg and mushroom on Melba toast is fab, though (even if it is a lie – the toast is on top!). It comes with an earthy Jerusalem artichoke purée and a hefty blob of butter spiked with Marmite. If that's not a plate to send a hangover on its way, I don't know what is.

I went past sexy little alcoves, where guests are guzzling cocktails, to the loo. The ladies is lit like... actually, it's not lit. The cubicle has one bulb, I'm guessing 20 watt. Surely some mistake? Especially from Broom, for whom

lighting is everything. Perhaps this is part of a theme. Those alcoves at Old Tom, I learn, are named after famous prostitutes and madams ("tom" being a bygone term for prostitute. Ugh); an "homage to the old Soho". Not as sexy as I'd thought, then.

After that harrumph, I must report that the puddings are wonderful. A flourless salted-chocolate cake is neither too fudgy nor crumbly, just potent; and two little lemon-and-thyme doughnuts with chocolate sauce and a frill of fluffy cream float down the gullet with ease.

Dishes range from £4 for chips to £11 for lamb rump and it's recommended to have six between two, plus puddings. You could get away with four and a cocktail if, like most here, you're alighting as part of a night out like a brightly coloured butterfly. We, and the doorstep couple, are here as restaurant punters. Open at night only, this place makes us all feel welcome and so it is with few reservations (groan) that I recommend it.

7.5/10

*Old Tom & English, 187b Wardour Street, London W1, Tel: 020 7287 7347.
£80 for two, with wine*