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Zeren Wilson has
a passion for dining
out alone.

Just for one please.” – How many times have I uttered this? A lot. I love it. I’m well up for this solo dining lark, me.

I’m always surprised at how many times I’m the only one dining alone in London, even when it’s a ‘dining at the bar’ kind of set-up. Somewhere like Soho’s Bocca di Lupo screams out for the impromptu solo swing-by, the kind of impulsive ‘sod it, I’m going in’ while walking past: the thrum of the open kitchen, the clatter of pans, the insistent hum of a full dining room. I’m a sucker for spotting a solitary bar stool available, and instantly coveting it, knowing that the chances of grabbing it are high. Call it a weakness, if you like. Who else wants to dine alone in a full restaurant? Well, um, me. I’ll take it.

If I didn’t enjoy eating alone, if I waited for friends and timings, arrangements and diarising, I wouldn’t get around to many of the restaurants that London’s relentless dining scene continues to spawn. If there’s nobody available, I’m still going. The most memorable example is when I had a reservation for a visit to Chez Panisse in Berkeley, California. Then the unforgivable: blown off by the dinner date. Eh? What? The most treasured reservation of the trip, and I’m faced with the very real possibility of having to cancel. Stuff that. Not happening. Yes, I’m driving down on my own from Sonoma County (an hour or so), and yes I will honour that reservation, and no I won’t go back to the UK with the “I almost went to Chez Panisse” story. Begone, foul and lingering disappointment.

It turned out to be one of the most memorable meals ever, which saw me chatting to Sally Clarke of Clarke’s in Notting Hill (a Chez Panisse alumnus), drinking Pierre Gimonnet ‘1er Cru Cuis’ all night (my favourite Blanc de Blancs grower, and one I’ve sold to restaurants), and cashing in on the glorious feeling of liberation after the second glass of fizz, when the decision had clearly been made that I wasn’t driving back, staying instead in the motel next door. Oh happy days. Russian River Valley Chardonnay and Pinot Noir began to flow...

A phrase which still reverberates, and neatly sums up the pleasure to be had from the solitary meal, came while dining alone at

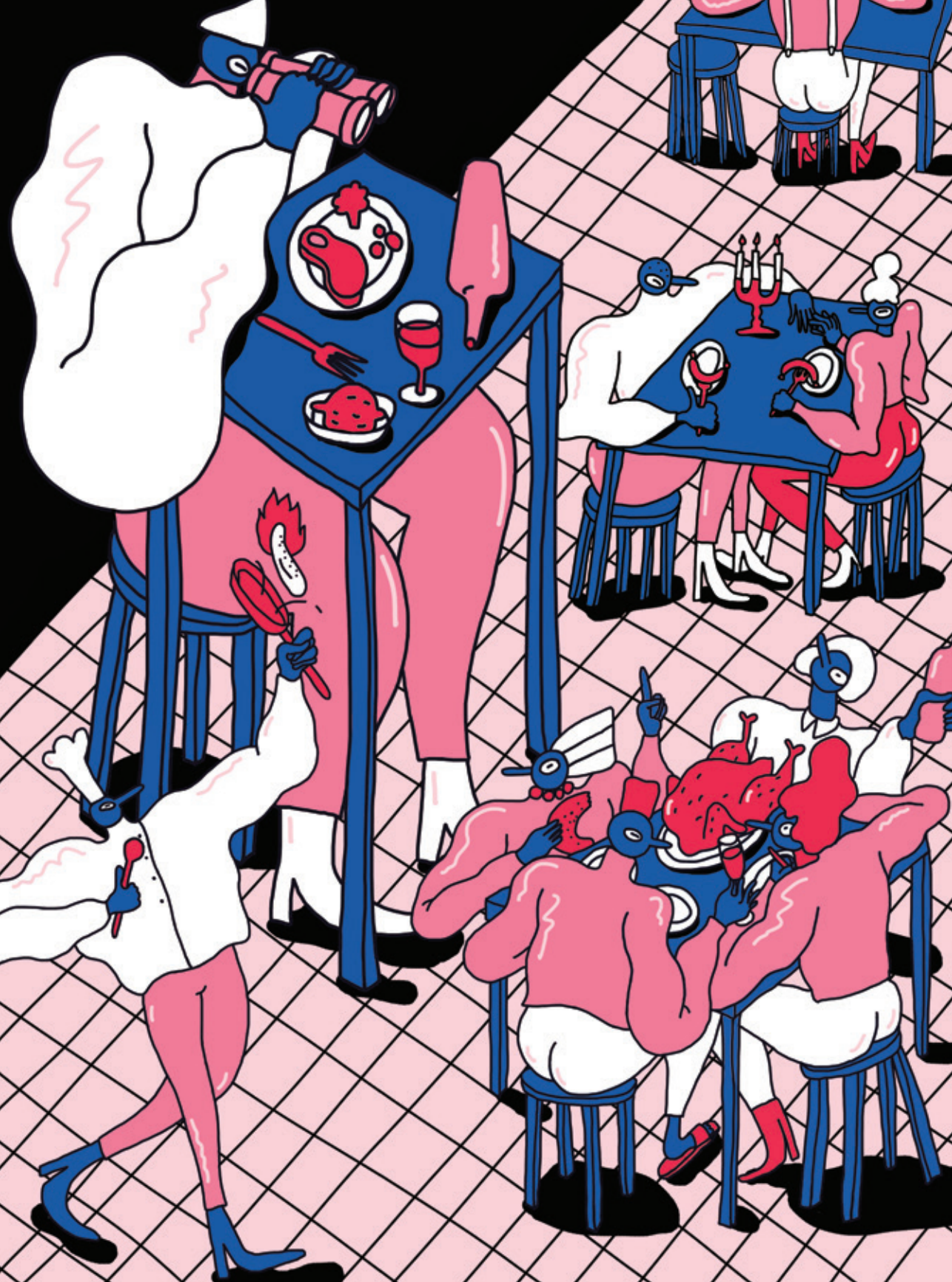


Illustration by Egle Zvirblyte

The Dock Kitchen, chatting to owner and chef Stevie Parle: “Dining alone is a luxury,” he offered. That’s it. A luxury. What a beautiful way to think about it; something to be treasured, wallowed in, enjoyed.

This paean to the joys of the unaccompanied meal may begin to sound like the thrashings of a misanthropic loner, an attempt to legitimise the experience with an element of ‘cooler than thou’ dining confidence, a two fingered ‘up yours’ flicked towards chattering tables. Not so. I have been to restaurants accompanied by others. Honest.

Dining with others is bloody great, of course it is. I love that too, but the shackles are off when I choose (whether freely or grudgingly), to cross the threshold alone. There would have been far fewer visits to two London spots that are fantastic for bar perching: A. Wong in Victoria for pristine dim sum and perfect kitchen voyeurism, and Primeur in Canonbury for lots of ‘doable’ smaller plates, every wine on the board poured by the glass and carafe. Bosh a bottle or not, see how you feel.

I remember a time when a solo meal also meant a whole bottle of wine was off the agenda – of course it is, don’t be silly mate. When did a bottle of wine no longer seem like too much for one? That barrier was breached some time ago, over here in any case. No shame, no going back. The perils of getting excited by a good wine list.

There have been a rash of articles over the last couple of years about us loosening our collars in the UK and embracing solo dining, with more openings that naturally embrace it via a combination of smaller plates, more seats facing open kitchens and an increase in all-day dining establishments. It’s a test of a savvy operation to make that one diner feel as

welcome as the big-spending table of six.

Restaurateur Russell Norman built his Polpo empire with the solo diner very firmly in mind, kicking things off at a time when we weren’t blessed with as many options on that front in Soho, Barrafinna the notable exception.

“Bar dining in general, and solo dining in particular, are essential parts of the Polpo/Polpetto/Spuntino experience,” says Norman. In reference to New York, this way of eating is something he treasures. “The thing I look forward to the most is being able to dine solo at some of the city’s best restaurant bars.” The group’s Spuntino website simply states “27 stools and a popcorn machine”. Solitary apotheosis.

Things reached some kind of ludicrous nadir with the announcement of the opening of Amsterdam’s Eenmaal in 2014, trumpeting itself as the “world’s first solo eatery”. I struggle to think of a more depressing restaurant concept. No, you twats, that’s not the point at all. I want to get high on the ineffable restaurant alchemy of a buzzing room, the whirr of plates coming out of the kitchen, the high-octane ‘pop’ in the room at 9pm as those glasses of wine kick in, voices are raised and you feel like you’re in the greatest kind of theatre in the world, with a myriad of distractions in which to immerse yourself. Eating in silence in a room full of sad solo diners (yes, sad! In this instance, in every sense, and in this instance only), was never part of the equation, was never on the menu, will never take off. Their stated intent to open in London has so far, thankfully, not materialised.

The feeling of skipping past the snaking queue at Barrafinna to jump into the only remaining spot is still one of the most euphoric moments of the ‘just for one’ evening. A luxury.