



“I thought it was shit”

I've Not Been Back

Zeren Wilson doesn't have time to return to *every* restaurant

Illustrations by Mike Reddy

“I forgot it was still open”
“I forgot to go back”
“I haven't had a chance”
“Been doing the new places”
“I thought it wasn't all that”
“I thought it was shit”

Just a few of the reasons/excuses/prevarications/lies that I reel out when asked about why I've not returned to a restaurant for ages or, increasingly frequently, ever again.

What sort of box-ticking, restaurant-hunting, new-opening-chasing, trend-hopping slut would use any of the above dodging mechanisms? Ummm...meekly raised arm at the back of the class, here. Sorry, sir, I won't do it again...or maybe I will. A succession of dates like a left-swiping Tinder addict searching for The One. No. No. Maybe. Definitely no. Ooh.

I'm guilty, of course I am. I stand accused of being a peripatetic restaurant-botherer, a dropper-inner, a fly-by-night, a dipper, a floater. Guilty, perhaps, but it's not my fault. Truly it isn't. Blame the restaurateurs and their damned fine menus and their chefs, the relentless onslaught of openings – I've been pounded into submission (almost) by the sheer number of shimmering ideas and concepts currently illuminating London.

Of course I'm grateful. London has never burned so fiercely with the white heat of restaurant fervour and creativity – a conflagration that has not abated for what is now beginning to nudge towards a decade of glorious renaissance. We are now, as I am often reminded, regarded by some commentators as a city that is throwing more exciting moves than New York or Paris. Lordy.

Hang on a minute though, often I do go back, I really do: a clutch of places get a regular

“Been doing the new places”

rat-a-tat-tat hammering. As well as the thrill of taking in the thrum of a new restaurant's first few weeks of service, even more satisfaction comes from the status of 'regular'. Slink into the regular seat, get the drink delivered before you ask for it (they know, of course they do), and bask in the comforting knowledge that the visit is not about analysis, and hell, the phone may even stay in the pocket – no photos of food. SHOCK. Go where you're known best, the sage advice that has been handed down. Dining nirvana.

Yet still the new openings keep coming, and Johnny One-Visit must get back in the saddle and gallop on to the next one. Anyway, it's work for some of us, right? This is the favourite lie thrown blithely at myself, a self-made deception bomb – it gets me every single time. Often, it's not even a lie. It really is work. Still, it's the whip I flagellate myself with on each occasion. Woe is me, another bloody new restaurant, must have an opinion, need to go, have to drop in, imperative to get there, quickly, rapidly, speedily, promptly, post-haste...and breathe.

It's becoming increasingly difficult to return to restaurants – especially so if you have any hope of keeping proper tabs on the chameleonesque trends suffusing London. So, what have these discarded venues done to offend? Usually nothing. Why no return visits? Um, dunno. Forgot it was still open? Forgot to go back? Haven't had a chance? Been doing the new places, ain't I...

Often, the reason for not returning is complacency. We're talking about the long-stayers here, not the new open kitchen down the road. Complacency that asserts that those calories will be better spent elsewhere, and, besides, restaurant X will still be there when we need it. We hope. The danger here is that months – years – can slip away before the next visit. Andrew Edmunds? Oh balls, forgot to go back. Vasco and Piero's Pavilion? Oh shit, forgot it was still there. Moro? Haven't

had a chance. La Petite Maison? Oh.

Recently, I have entered into a holy pact with a friend, a new policy (his idea, the glory is all his), as to how we approach visits to the River Café. It was inspired by the sinking realisation that we had let a year pass by without having at least nailed one sunshine-drenched lunch there. How had we let this happen? New rule: we book the next table on the way out after each visit, whether it's two, three, four months later. Just book it, lock it in, job done. If a restaurant makes you feel that good, every time, like a shot of dining amphetamine, it's worth installing a safety-lock. Because we're worth it.

The wailing and gnashing of collective teeth when a stayer for an admirable number of years falls, when the sad news of a closure enters the timeline, this is often accompanied by a public (Twitter, always Twitter) outpouring of grief. The outbursts are inevitably voluminous, and predictably disingenuous: “Gutted about X closing”; “So sad to hear”; “Loved that place”; “Just heard the news [enter sad face emoji here]”; “Gutted”. The question then, to one and all, needs to be WHEN DID YOU LAST GO? There would be a host of chastened faces scurrying away from that one. I may be among them. We're all guilty. Yep, we've been buffeted by such a slew of restaurants that we are forever throwing coquettish glances at the newcomers: show us what you've got, come on, we'd love to come and play... Prove you're worthy of our love.

The saddest restaurant visit, surely, is the 'never went back'. If it was my place, I'd want to know why. What did we do wrong? What could we do to woo you back? The kindest reason/excuse/prevarication/lie is probably the one that is wheeled out to assuage any one-sided break-up: “It's not you, it's me.”

Let's leave it there, then. It's me. I forgot to go back. I'm so sorry.

