

THE POWER OF

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Dulled out by fine dining? Luckily London has something for everyone and right now there are three 'small-plate' restaurants that everyone is gagging to get into. **Nick Harman** gives a heads-up on some must-eats in London...



BRAWN

For those not into offal the name brawn might not mean much. Be warned; it's another name for a seasoned jellied loaf made from the head of a pig.

The tough name nails Brawn's colours to the mast, they like meat in Brawn and you should like it too. Located in the flower market of Columbia Road in the trendy East End, this is a partner restaurant to Terroirs the eternally packed out place near Charing Cross. Despite being in Bethnal Green, and so a bit off the radar for some, Brawn is rammed most nights.

The good news is that you don't actually have to have meat. The rather irritatingly cutesy menu – Taste Ticklers, Pig, Plancha, Clean and Slow-Cook has something for everyone. A starter of Rillette, the awesomely fatty coarse pâté, is like buttering your excellent, locally baked sourdough bread with lard, but believe me that's not a criticism.

Dorset Palourde clams cooked in Manzanilla sherry are delightful, these super shellfish have an iodine flavour that the sherry makes the most of. Seared Cornish squid, blackly scarred from the grill and topped with gremolata is a dish you'll have had elsewhere but here it seems to be in its unpretentious element. And a stew of sausage and beans transcends its mundane sounding ingredients with real panache.

There's a lot to try at Brawn so go mob-handed to get a real selection, or plan to make several visits to satisfy what will soon become an obsession.

Brawn
49 Columbia Rd. London E2 7RG
www.brawn.co.uk



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Forget going upstairs at Opera Tavern – sure there's a nice restaurant up there but the real action in this former Covent Garden pub is downstairs. The bar has the feel of a proper tapas place as you fight to get a stool and start ordering...

With a theatre opposite Opera Tavern pulls in punters of all types, from out-of-towners wanting to eat before a show to local office workers off the leash and in the mood for grilled meats and chilled beers.

Opera Tavern is from the same people that brought us Dehesa and Salt Yard, both very successful Spanish restaurants and they certainly have the magic touch for this kind of dining. The best dishes come from the highly visible Robata grill, with meats expertly cooked over charcoal and served in seconds to rapacious customers.

The Iberian pork burger is already the stuff of legend, hot off the grill and served in a teeny tiny bun with a dab of foie gras, it's eaten in two bites but the memory lingers. Nibbles of pork scratchings, in this case pig's ears, are salty and more-ish although some threaten to break your teeth.

A very un-Spanish Scotch egg shows how these things can transcend the bad memories of family picnics, the exterior is smooth and the egg inside is just set into wobbly perfection. Grilled skewer of flank steak with ceps again benefits from the Robata magic, turning an often-overlooked piece of cow into something you'll willingly eat again anytime. And Spanish means veggies can also enjoy themselves, baby peppers stuffed with puréed smoked aubergine and tomato are delightful while courgette flowers, deep-fried with goat's cheese and topped with honey make you mmm and ahh with delight.

You'll find your bill gets bigger as the evening extends but try not to worry, you'll be singing Opera Tavern's praises on the way home.

Opera Tavern
23 Catherine Street, Covent Garden
WC2B 5JS
www.operatavern.co.uk



SPUNTINO

Okay so it's not a nice name, sounding like something an Italian might shout at you after you ran off with his wife, but the latest space from the all-dominating Norman Russell of Polpo and Polpetto fame is already so busy you'll have to queue to get in.

That's partly down to Russell's clever marketing nous, together with a no reservations policy that inevitably fuels foodies' desire to go there. But it's also a case of right style, right vibe, right food, right time. Based on Lower East Side New York-style places it's vibrant, noisy and crowded and probably not the best place to take your granny.

She certainly wouldn't recognise the macaroni cheese, here named Mac & Cheese because New Yorkers are far too busy to use whole words. This replaces the usual mousetrap cheddar with mozzarella, Parmesan and fontina and topped with breadcrumbs. It's very cheesy, very nice and cosily comforting too.

Fast becoming the dish to choose is the truffled egg toast, a slice of bread that's been excavated out and the hole filled with two egg yolks, fontina cheese and then baked in the oven with some truffle oil. Whilst your heart cries out for a green salad injection, your head cries out for more.

Finish at Spuntino with a 'peanut butter and jelly sandwich'. It isn't of course and I won't spoil the surprise, but you'll be saluting the Stars and Stripes after you've eaten it.

Spuntino
61 Rupert Street, London. W1D 7PW
www.spuntino.co.uk