

Welcome to The Fat Badger, London's new invite-only pub

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The Fat Badger, above Canteen on Portobello Road.

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You probably haven't heard about the place that's just opened in the old Pizza East site on the corner of Golborne and Portobello Road. No, not Canteen, on the ground floor - that's old news. And no, not the spot coming from chef George Williams (ex-Dorian, The Bull, River Cafe) opening in the rafters later this year. The Public House Group (The Hero, The Pelican) has taken over the whole building, and the one that's most interesting is the one on the second floor. The one that doesn't exist. The one that's invite only.

Right at end of last year, The Fat Badger opened. Given Phil Winser, James Gummer and Olivier van Themsche's track record - Canteen is a joy, earning a rare five-star review from The Standard's David Ellis - I sensed The Fat Badger would be good. The trio seems to have cracked the bourgeois gastropub formula: big windows, sexy lighting, banging cocktails, homely food, decent staff and prime locations. Easy, right? Except just about everyone else seems to mess it up. But the boys haven't. The Fat Badger is their best one yet.

The Marketing Genius

First off, credit where it's due: whoever leads their marketing needs a pay rise. Tell the entitled Notting Hill set they can't get into a place and instead offer up a VIP WhatsApp number as the only way to gain entry? Genius. A non-members members' club. The queue is a mixture of desperation and excitement. The pub is non-existent on Google and had a curious two-week

opening stint pre-Christmas before mysteriously shutting down. Some say it was the loud smoking area, others that Dorian's staff Christmas party got out of hand. But I prefer to believe it was all part of the owners' grand strategy. By the time whispers of a reopening began, the question wasn't if it would return, but if it had ever really happened.

But it's back. I message the number. After some guest list back-and-forth, I'm ushered upstairs under an olde worlde sign bearing the animal in the name - the only clue you're in the right place. If you've seen those TikToks of speakeasies hidden in laundry machines or phone booths, this ain't that. It doesn't feel gimmicky, just a real sense that you're in on a secret. It's got that "clubbing at 16" vibe but with a naughty grown-up energy.

Glorious, Chaotic Harmony

The first thing that strikes me is the juxtaposition; it genuinely feels like a proper old-school pub: oak-lined walls, oil lamps, large wooden tables, an open fire, even a darts board and bagatelle table. The kind of place people dream of fleeing London for. But don't be fooled. The martini drinkers would win a landslide referendum against the beer and ale brigade. This is London's metropolitan class at play.

It feels almost lawless. It is the first time I have seen individual cigarettes being sold from a sweet jar behind the bar. A ragtag band - somewhere between Bob Marley and Shania Twain - sets the tone. "This isn't like my local," my friend says. The energy is, well ... fruity. I spot a bleary-eyed social media chef known for his devotion to butter getting a round in with a group of vaguely familiar TV faces. Someone leans in and tells me he's meant to be having a baby tomorrow.

I head to the bar and clock one of the barmen has that unmistakable Johnson DNA - maybe one of eight (or more) rumoured offspring. His colleague insists I try the house cosmopolitan, and while anywhere else, settling into a pub booth with a drink Barbara Cartland would approve of might earn strange looks, here it makes total sense.

The pub's signature wallpaper

The crowd is a glorious mess: impulsive, hedonistic yet moving together in chaotic harmony. A "neurospicy" sister-and-brother duo loudly introduce themselves, boasting about their "castle in Wandsworth". Castle? Never mind. A group of spaced-out Lebanese brothers sipping Krug proudly tell me they have been here four times since it re-opened last week. A mother and daughter duo making giggly joint trips to the bathroom, a ritual that's as unsettling as it is heartwarming. Are there celebrities? Calm down, of course. Lily James, Margot Robbie, Fabien Frankel, Stanley Tucci, Eddie Redmayne, Jamie Dornan. David Cameron, too, which is a bit of a blow. But he's not a proper celebrity, is he?

Drink, Eat, Be Anarchic

Two drinks in, hunger strikes. There's a concise menu of bar snacks. Three sandwiches. I ask for them all. On completion, an Ozempic-looking couple beside me joke that they've "never seen anyone so greedy". I take it as a compliment. I'm now five pints deep.

There's a pull to this place that, well, doesn't quite make sense. You will find yourself going in for one and inevitably stay for more, and not quite understand why. No doubt, some will think that this all sounds terrible. But on a proper night out - the kind where plans unravel and time stops mattering - this sense of anarchy is exactly what makes it work. That's the pull of The Fat Badger. It shouldn't be this fun. I want to hate it. Everyone does. But I don't. No one does.