



# Otto

Architectural marvel in Maida Vale.

Photography **Tony Gibson**

**I**s architecture the new eating out? Judging by the frenzy of architectural transformation going on in London, it must be. Former banks now house smart restaurants, power stations are being converted into bars and bistros. Any interesting building seems up for grabs: one subterranean public toilet has been turned into a cybercafé. Yet there has been only one purpose-built new restaurant in London in the last 30 years (the bar and restaurant called Putney Bridge). The prohibitive cost of new buildings, plus the difficulty of obtaining the appropriate planning permission, means that

even modernists have to work within the confines of existing old architecture.

The Otto Dining Lounge in Maida Vale is a newly built extension on an existing building. The interior has been designed by architects Stiff + Trevillion along clean, minimalist lines – there's lots of glass and mirrors, clever concealed lighting, extruded aluminium bar stools, mid-brown wood and modular black leather seating. The bar is austere but fabulous, like a 1950s Scandinavian hotel or airport lounge designed by Arne Jacobsen – which of course makes it utterly contemporary. I'm told the best-

looking bit – the big lounge bar – is to become yet another "members' bar" (groan – though we walked straight in). Which leaves the smaller lobby bar and the restaurant as the only public areas.

The dining area feels just a little too public and waiting-room-like. Call me old-fashioned, but I think restaurants are places where you should feel some intimacy, not somewhere you're showcased behind a plate glass wall for the benefit of passing motorists. We felt like we were killing time before our flight was called.

We wanted to like the menu – any place that's got the gall to serve scared kangaroo, sumac, plantain and beetroot purée must have some nerve. But we were underwhelmed by the dishes we tried, especially at these West End prices. The kangaroo was near-raw slices too thick for a carpaccio, and where was that sour sumac flavour? Crab cake was okay, though it was served on a dreary lentil base. Worst Dish of the Evening Award went to something described as 'hot vegetable tea, ume boshi noodles, iced shiso pesto, £11.80' which was like a monstrous

carbuncle of bland pot noodle with a cup of flavourless vegetable stock poured over it; it had a mushy texture, and the dominant flavour resembled old straw. In contrast, more conventional dishes such as wholesome blinis with smoked salmon and keta (Pacific salmon roe) were quite good; perhaps it's best to play safe when ordering here. The wine list is New World oriented with bottles from good producers, and service throughout – from arrival to wine service was flawlessly professional and well judged.

In contrast to the patchy meal, we thought the bar was superb. Service was attentive and friendly, the drinks list is well structured with all the right pouring brands and fashionable but not gimmicky cocktails (Negroni, Bramble, Mojito all well made for £6.50). Pity it's soon going to be 'exclusive', ie keeping out the likes of you and me. *Guy Dimond Otto Dining Lounge, 215 Sutherland Avenue, W9 020 7266 3131 | Maida Vale tube. Bar open daily 6-11pm. Restaurant open Mon-Fri 12noon-2.30pm, 7-11pm; Sat, Sun 11am-2.30pm, 7-11pm. Meal for two with wine and service: around £85.*

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