



Interview

SIBLING *reverry*

First came the The Palomar, then The Barbary. Now *Layo and Zoë Paskin*, the brother and sister restaurateurs, have opened The Blue Posts – and it's already the hottest booking in town

Words **RACHEL WALKER**

There's a momentary lull in the dinnertime babble as chef Luke Robinson flips out the tarte Tatin. It's a high-risk dessert – particularly with 11 diners watching from across the kitchen counter – but it only adds to the theatrics here in the West End. Welcome to Evelyn's Kitchen – brother and sister, Layo and Zoë Paskin's latest launch. With packed reservations at their nearby restaurants The Palomar (2014) and The Barbary (2016), it's little surprise that, since opening in late-February, Evelyn's Kitchen has already become one of the hottest bookings in town.

"I like small places," smiles Layo when I meet both him and Zoë a week later. "Not pokey-small, but a feeling of intimacy can be magical." There's an unseasonal flurry of springtime snow outside the window of their top-floor office. Soho is unnervingly quiet, but there's already a buzz downstairs.

From street level, The Blue Posts looks every bit the lovingly restored Soho pub – all Georgian windows, hidden alcoves and beautiful wood panelling. Only those in the know will spot the discreet doorway leading downstairs to Evelyn's Kitchen, or the original early 18th-century staircase which winds up to The Mulwray, the first-floor cocktail lounge, which has a mezcal-heavy menu and an exclusive, members' club feel.

When the pair took over the building, it was a dive: "We salvaged as much as we could," says Zoë, conceding that the floorboards were all that was worth saving. They dug down in the beer cellar, and considered a basement kitchen. "Then we thought, 'How many good

staff are going to want to work underground sending up pub food?" says Layo. "It's not an attractive proposition."

Perversely, they overcame the problem by luring diners downstairs to the cellar as well. The pair worked round the hatch and ladder – where the beer kegs are still rolled in off the street – installing a compact kitchen and a countertop for diners to perch round, close enough to chit chat to the chefs as they churn out plate after tantalising plate.

Layo and Zoë's was an unusual path into restaurants. It all began with The End – the legendary nightclub which Layo co-founded in the mid-1990s. When his career as a music producer and DJ took off, he recruited his younger sister to help manage the club. "Growing up together, you have similar tastes and sense of humour – there's very strong trust if you get on with a sibling," Layo says. "Sure, you can have a bad day together and get on each other's nerves, but that bond is unbreakable."

The End closed its doors in 2009, but it wasn't long until the siblings were working together again – this time on a collaboration with three Israeli chefs who ran a restaurant in Old Jerusalem, and were looking to launch in London. The pair found a site on the fringes of Chinatown, worked on the aesthetic, the feel, the culture and together they launched The Palomar. "It was nerve-wracking entering a partnership with people you don't really know – basically an arranged marriage in business terms," says Zoë.

The gamble paid off. The Palomar was an instant hit. "The success took us by surprise," says Layo, admitting that he was occasionally freaked out by the celebrities rocking-up on a nightly basis: "There were prime ministers and Hollywood A-listers with their bodyguards in the corner. It was a real who's who."

With just 40 covers and 16 seats at the bar, it was impossible to be accommodating with numbers, but that didn't stop the hustle. "If you ask for one more seat, we usually have to say 'no' – not



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because we're being awkward, but because there just isn't one."

The buzz continued with their second restaurant, The Barbary, which serves North African plates from an open kitchen. Then came Jacob the Angel, an independent coffee house with freshly baked bagels and tahini-laced madeleines. It's a long way from the London dining scene of their childhood. The pair chuckle as they remember pie and mash near their grandfather's factory in Hoxton and the pepper steak at a long-closed restaurant in Swiss Cottage called The Cosmo.

Still, Soho was their regular stomping ground. "From the age of 13 I'd be here buying music or visiting my friends who worked at Berwick Street Market," says

Layo. He agrees that it has changed beyond recognition but, unlike lots of Londoners, there's no melancholy: "Negative change takes place when a charming area becomes not charming at all," he says. "I don't think it's fair to say that of Soho."

Instead, Layo lists the members' clubs on Dean Street as well as Brindisa (Spanish tapas) and Xu (cult-Taiwanese) which have moved to Rupert Street since The Palomar launched. "The great thing about the West End is that people go out here on Monday night, Tuesday night, Wednesday night," he says. "If you're good – and you have to be good – you'll get discovered."

It's a week of gloomy news in the hospitality industry, though. When we meet up, it's recently been announced that restaurant insolvencies have gone up 20% on the past year – a meatball restaurant, modern Korean and Jamie Oliver outlet are among the local casualties. "There's this odd perception that everyone in the restaurant industry is making loads of money, when anyone working in restaurants knows how hard it is to make any money – let alone loads of money," Layo says.

"Take tonight," he continues, pointing to the snow-covered street below. "That weather will kill most restaurant trade," he sighs, reminding me how empty restaurants still have to be fully-staffed with a fully-stocked



kitchen, even if there are no diners. "There are so many moments like that in a year which you can't possibly predict – then Brexit comes, the pound drops, everything goes up in price, but the customer doesn't want to pay any extra."

Layo predicts the emphasis shifting onto value for money, whether it's a Michelin-starred meal or a hamburger. "You can go to a restaurant which is £150 per head and feel that you've had a great meal at a great price, or you could spend £20 and feel ripped-off," he says. "Value is a very varied thing."

Surely there's a temptation with an exclusive, 11-seater restaurant to hoik up prices – but the Paskins practice what they preach. Downstairs, the house white is a crisp Bulgarian wine from the Thracian Valley (£5.75) which was sought out for its value for money. Clever dishes – smoked eel, potato blini, beetroot (£9) – feel extravagant without being extortionate, and the kitchen set-up guarantees an intimate dinner, which is more than just a meal out.

The Paskins' skill is in judging the Soho mood and, once again, it's paid off. There's no doubt that life has been breathed back into the historic dive: there's a buzz from the basement, a crowd at the bar, and a warm glow from the first floor cocktail lounge. I reluctantly pull the door behind

me and step back out into the spring snow. The streets might be barren, but the packed room I leave behind suggests that the Paskins are ready to tackle any storm that is to come.

Evelyn's Kitchen at The Blue Posts, 28 Rupert Street, Chinatown, W1 theblueposts.co.uk



Layo Et Zoë's LONDON GLOSSARY

FOR A NIGHTCAP

ZP: We're agreed on The Groucho for a nightcap. If I'm having a drink drink, then I'll order a Twinkle (vodka, elderflower cordial, Perrier-Jouët NV Champagne, lemon twist), and Layo is fond of an Old Fashioned. 45 Dean St, Soho, W1; thegrouchoclub.com

CLOTHES SHOPS

LP: I like Trunk Clothiers Ltd on Chiltern Street – it's quite eclectic with a classic aesthetic." ZP: If I was buying myself a nice dress, then I'd go to A.P.C. on Lexington Street. 8 Chiltern St, Marylebone, W1; trunkclothiers.com 48 Lexington St, Soho, W1; apc.fr

HIDDEN GEM

LP: Waterlow Park, next to Highgate Cemetery which was bequeathed as a 'garden for the gardenless' – it's a really lovely spot. Highgate Hill, Highgate, N6; waterlowpark.org.uk

CAFES

ZP: My favourite is Cafe Columbia, on Columbia Road – I love going down there on a Sunday for the flower market and then having a bagel and a mug of tea. LP: I get my bread from Pavilion Bakery, and I love Violet which is nearby and does really nice salted caramel muffins. 138 Columbia Rd, Bethnal Green, E2 18 Broadway Market, Hackney, E8; pavilionbakery.com 47 Wilton Way, Hackney, E8; violetcakes.com

GALLERIES

LP: I like the Friday Lates openings at The National Gallery and Tate Modern. I find it hard to find a connection with a piece of art if there are thousands of people round me – not in a selfish way, it's just difficult to concentrate. The Lates are brilliant because there aren't so many people about. The National Gallery, Trafalgar Square, WC2; nationalgallery.org.uk Tate Modern, Bankside, SE1; tate.org.uk

FOR A RUN

ZP: I often run round Hampstead Heath. I start round the tennis courts, and then go up to the woods round the back of Kenwood House to the Vale of Health, which has a beautiful view. I always end up on Parliament Hill where I look out over the city. I nod to where my grandma used to live and blow her a kiss.