

# Eating out Giles Coren

‘The squid, chorizo and chickpea stew rocked my world. Poetry. Stunning room as well’

## Blixen et al

In the summer of 2012, a writer called Thomas Harding saw his 14-year-old son, Kadian, killed on his bicycle. Before his very eyes, his father saw it, cycling behind him down a country track as Kadian’s brakes failed and he hurtled out across the A4 into the path of a white van.

There is nothing imaginable on Earth that is worse than that. There are people who have been killed and people whose children have been killed. But before all of these, there are people who have seen their children killed. Nothing can be worse.

I think about Kadian’s death most days, and I never even met him. I knew his father a bit, at prep school in the 70s and early 80s, but I hadn’t seen him since he was younger than Kadian. So when I heard about the accident it was a struggle to process. This 12-year-old boy I once knew has lost his 14-year-old son to a terrible accident? How does that work?

It doesn’t, of course. How could it?

At the time it happened, Thomas must have just finished writing a book called *Hanns and Rudolf* – about his own great-uncle and the capture of the commandant of Auschwitz – because that was how I heard about Kadian. My literary agent had sent me the book because he thought I would like it (he was right) and when I said, “I was at school with

Thomas Harding,” he told me about Kadian.

After Kadian’s death, Thomas kept a journal and last year it was published as *Kadian Journal*. I bought it. But I haven’t read it. Around the time of its publication, Thomas gave an interview in which he said something like – and I paraphrase clumsily – “After Kadian died, I kept thinking it was because we had been too happy.” I wish I had never read that sentence, let alone the whole book. I cannot hold my own children now, or watch them playing, without worrying that I am too happy, and they are going to be taken away.

By chance, I saw Thomas again for the first time in 34 years at a party six weeks ago for an anniversary of our school, and in the pub afterwards. There he was. Thomas Harding. Still alive, despite it all. Standing there with a pint. Stocky, big smile, grey jersey, instantly recognisable as Thomas Harding, except bald as an egg.

I didn’t mention Kadian. Too late to say sorry, no point saying anything else. And I didn’t mention my kids, either. I felt so guilty for them being alive (he’ll know that, I imagine). Although I’m touching wood like a bastard here (does Formica count?) because there are two weeks between writing this and publication, and Kitty’s got a bicycle. (I’m making his grief all about me, which is what some people do with grief – maybe all people.)

Then yesterday I got an email from him. *Kadian Journal* is out in paperback, he told

me, and to mark the publication, "Penguin Random House is inviting people to commit random acts of kindness. To go beyond your normal routine, to reach out and make a difference to someone's day. A small, simple gesture can often have a big impact. No kindness is too small. #kadiankindness."

He asked me to pass it on. And I did. And then I thought, "I know, I'll make my act of kindness to be incredibly kind to some restaurants." Trivial and crap? Maybe, but Kadian loved his food (Thomas sent me a page from the book about Kadian's appetite), and so while the handful of places I am about to praise are all in their own way very good, they also have weaknesses which today, for once and once only, I am not going to mention, even in passing.

They can thank Kadian for that.

#### **Patron Cave à Manger**

*26 Fortess Road, London NW5 (patronlondon.com)*

This place shimmers like a Parisian jewel at the bottom end of Fortess Road as it arrives dustily in Kentish Town from its starting point in Tufnell Park. The owners packed up and moved here from Café Gourmand in Lexington Street because, I can only imagine, they had heard about the Kentish Town restaurant renaissance and wanted to be near me, I mean, it.

The kitchen is an all-girl affair, apart from the washing-up chap, while the waiting staff are young, male and French, and the local mums who pack this place out every evening can hardly control themselves. They're blushing so much they can barely swallow.

The atmosphere is romantic, friendly and sexy all at the same time and there is nowhere in the world I would rather have a pastis followed by gleaming crudités, a good steak and a three-minute walk home than here. Indeed, there is nowhere else in the world that I could.

#### **Joe's Southern Kitchen & Bar**

*300 Kentish Town Road, London NW5 (020 7485 7331; joessouthernkitchen.co.uk)*

Five doors down from Patron, this American diner has been rammed solid since it opened about a week ago. It is owned by a chain that runs restaurants mostly out of Covent Garden and the West End (Maxwell's, P.J.'s, Palm Court), so to have its first truly local urban adventure in KT only shows how I am now, I mean, it is now the centre

of the known universe. Fried and barbecued chicken, slow-roasted short rib and mac'n'cheese are washed down (by me and most of my neighbours) with an excellent selection of beers. But really anything except Camden ale is unacceptable round here.

#### **The Bull & Gate**

*389 Kentish Town Road, London NW5 (020 3437 0905; bullandgatenw5.co.uk)*

This famous old live music venue has been bought by Young's and renovated, much to the chagrin of the stinking crusties who used to like it. It's only been open a couple of days and I haven't been in yet, but I passed it on the way back from Joe's and the renovation has not only brought the best out of its stunning

interior, but made it visible from the street and thus part of the fabric of the Lyons of the North (which is what they are calling Kentish Town these days). The food is delicious and the staff are good-looking, knowledgeable and kind, I imagine.

#### **131**

*131 The Promenade, Cheltenham (01242 822939; no131.com/restaurant)*

Despite not being in Kentish Town, this newish brasserie is a real find, if you've got a sat-nav. Because who knew Cheltenham was all the way out here? 131 is part of a hotel that occupies a stunning Georgian building and must be one of the best places to eat in all Somerset. Or possibly Gloucestershire. I didn't do geography because at my school it was that or Latin.

Aaaaanyway, Esther and I had a couple of really good cocktails in hipsterish glasses ("appleskin spritz" and "spring greens") and then yummy braised ox tongue, all rich and treacly, with a very finely cut, sharp, rather riveting celeriac remoulade. After that we shared a huge salad of local beetroot, blood orange and feta (I love a nice fat West Country portion) and a gleaming slab of bream with sautéed leeks and salsify that had been suggested by our superb waitress. Superb as in good at her job, as opposed to superb in a sexist and objectifying way. Although that too. Esther had a huge, sweet, tender Cotswold lamb chump (the Cotswolds are full of huge chumps) with couscous and harissa and we washed it down, weirdly, with a terrific little 8oz Angus fillet off the Jospier grill.

Best of all was the jolly little pissed fellow in a tweed suit who staggered in at one

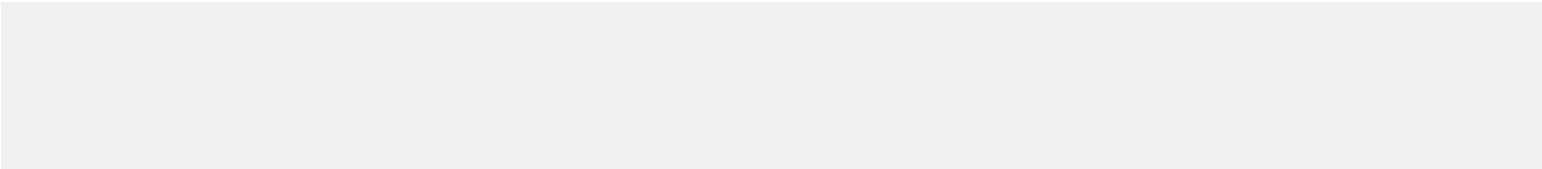
point, leant over our table and said, "Isn't Cheltenham amaaaazing? I'm from Andover. We jusht don't have playshes like thish in Andover ..." and staggered off.

**Blixen**

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(020 7101 0093; [blixen.co.uk](http://blixen.co.uk))

She had a farm in Africa, but I had the squid, chorizo and chickpea stew with saffron aioli and it rocked my world: finely sliced fresh baby cephalopod, a little pork fat, a little spice, the spring breeze of those red stamens. Poetry. Bloody stunning room as well, right in the bustling heart of Spitalfields. Nowhere I'd rather eat lunch. David Baddiel had the crispy pork belly with spaetzle. I can't remember what he thought about it, but he hates not to be mentioned. ■





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