



Dining at Shrimpy's at the King's Cross Filling Station, where avocado, fish and salsa can be found on the menu.

HAZEL THOMPSON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

In London, a Taste of the U.S.

By KATIE PARLA

JUST steps from Carnaby Street, patrons line up to sample pulled pork and beef ribs and wash them down with bourbon and Pabst Blue Ribbon in a dining room that would not seem out of place in Lexington, Ky. The restaurant, Pitt Cue, though, is actually about 4,000 miles east of Lexington, in London.

Chefs and restaurateurs there have increasingly been traveling across the Atlantic for inspiration in recent years, fostering a boom in ambitious American comfort dining. Burgers and chili dogs are replacing standbys like fish and chips and Sunday roast. A look at three of the newest and most popular such restaurants in the city provides a hint of the varied culinary landscape that Britons have mined in American cuisine.

Pitt Cue (1 Newburgh Street; pittcue.co.uk) opened as a 30-seat restaurant in Soho in January after a successful nine-month run as a food truck operated by Jamie Berger.

"I draw on experiences that go back to my early childhood and the time I spent in the South, where not only my mother was born, but my grandparents lived out the rest of their lives," Mr. Berger said. He has supplemented his background with recent trips to Kentucky, Texas, Kansas, Missouri and Tennessee to research cooking techniques. The result of his efforts is tasty, though not quite authentic, barbecue. Still, the

interminable lines several months after Pitt Cue's opening suggest that it's close enough.

Another restaurant, **Rita's** (33-35 Stoke Newington Road; ritasbaranddining.com), opened last month on the ground floor of a building in Dalston whose basement houses the club Birthday's. It packages American-influenced food for a north London crowd. "What we're trying to do is not necessarily copy anything, but take ideas that work there," said Gabriel Pryce, a chef and one of Rita's founders, who lived in New York for five years. "So eat late, open late, have alcohol that complements that kind of food."

That kind of food is a menu built around fried chicken. "We said, London is full of these cheap fried chicken shops," said Jackson Boxer, a chef and a member of Rita's team. "Why, when fried chicken is the most delicious thing in the world and universally loved, does no one do it well?" Rita's has changed all that with its satisfying deep fried deboned thigh served with sriracha-roast-garlic aioli on a white crusty roll. The cost: £6.50 (about \$9.80, at \$1.50 to the pound).

A more glamorous interpretation of American cuisine is on hand at **Shrimpy's** (the King's Cross Filling Station, Goods Way; 44-20-8880-6111; shimpys.co.uk). The concept for the restaurant, which opened in May on the banks of Regent's Canal, had its be-

ginnings in a trip that David Waddington and Pablo Flack, business partners at Bistrottheque in Bethnal Green, took through South America and California three years ago.

"All of this was sort of food research but in a low-level kind of way," Mr. Waddington said. "As we started to get all these bits of information in our heads, we started to pull together an idea of the kind of place we'd be interested in opening and we felt quite strongly that a sort of West Coast experience was going to be a way forward."

The idea came together partly because of a joke based on a fictional character called Shrimpy that the two created. "In lots of ways she helped us make decisions, from menu items to the glassware to the linen to the decoration," Mr. Waddington said. Shrimpy apparently prefers bright, modern spaces and crisp linens. And her dish of choice is likely to feature avocado, fish or salsa. The place, an abandoned gasoline station, was renovated by Carmody Groarke, whose futuristic take on the filling station of the American West features undulating panels of fluted fiberglass. Just as the architects adapted an iconic American form for London, so too have Mr. Waddington and Mr. Flack created an American-inspired fantasy fit for King's Cross.

"It's not a Californian restaurant at all," Mr. Waddington said. "It's a feeling and it's a restaurant that belongs to Shrimpy." ■

Check In / Check Out

MARSEILLE

Mama Shelter Marseille

UPSHOT

A slick and cheeky addition to Marseille's quiet back streets, with doubles from 79 euros (\$95, at \$1.20 to the euro).

BASICS

This 127-room hotel opened in the spring, becoming a prominent trendy yet casual establishment on Marseille's hotel scene. Conceived by the French philosopher and urbanist Cyril Aouizerate and the Trigano family, who are also behind the Club Med venture, this Philippe Starck-designed hotel is the second outpost of the brand, which opened Mama Shelter Paris in 2008. The aim is to offer a high-quality experience at low-end prices. The result is impressive. Mr. Starck's whimsical touch and the convivial atmosphere of the restaurant and bar go far. In the industrial lobby, a former butcher's shop, the unconventional details — a bench with school chair backs at varying angles, staff aprons printed with bright Pop Art-inspired portraits of the founders' mothers — will make you smile.

LOCATION

Mama Shelter is nestled in a cluster of charming stone houses in the Notre-Dame-du-Mont neighborhood, close to three metro stations. It is a short walk to the old port, popular for its bars and restaurants and for the Notre-Dame church atop a hill that towers above it all. It is also a five-minute walk to the arty Cours Julien area, with independent cafes and shops.

THE ROOM

At check-in, a friend and I were given three options: a patio view, a street view or a rooftop view. We went with the rooftop view, on the sixth and uppermost floor. The tiny room — 215 square feet — felt cold and bland. The double bed faced the wall instead of a window, the flooring was thick linoleum and the walls were of exposed concrete, one with a hanging aluminum-framed mirror. But it did have elements of warmth. That bed, for example, was supremely comfortable, dressed in white high-thread-count cotton and an array of different pillows to suit a range of sleepers. The room's highlight was the sloping roof and skylights, allowing you to look at

the stars or across Marseille's terracotta chimneys and tiled rooftops.

THE BATHROOM

Small and basic but sleek and functional. Delicious smelling Kiehl's products and fluffy towels made us feel pampered. The only drawbacks were the harsh lighting and the sinks made of a material that made it hard to rinse away debris.

AMENITIES

Both Wi-Fi and video on demand are free in the rooms. There is no room service, which doesn't count as a drawback because you're not meant to stay in here. On the ground floor, the bar and restaurant has a resident D.J., the local celebrity D.J. Bobzilla,



MAMA SHELTER

A room at the Philippe Starck-designed hotel.

who during the daytime can often be found giving guests advice on what to see in the city. On Wednesday to Friday evenings live bands selected by the French rapper Rocé perform in the restaurant. In addition to music, the bar serves up creative cocktails that shouldn't be skipped, despite their 12-euro price tag, and another bar offers Pastis on the patio until 10 p.m. The restaurant serves French food with a Mediterranean twist, and everything on the menu, from the burger and fries to the sea bream ceviche, is a sure bet.

BOTTOM LINE

This fun, stylish and upmarket hotel, with an excellent casual restaurant and bustling bar, provides a comfortable base for exploring the charms of Marseille's old port without breaking the bank.

Mama Shelter Marseille, 64, rue de la Loubière; (33-4) 84-35-20-00; mamashelter.com.

ROOKSANA HOSSENALLY

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