



Dalston Jazz Bar

Frankie Jones

If you live in Dalston, you'll know how hectic it can be.

Men flogging persimmon and plantain from the crack of dawn on Ridley Road Market. Missionaries thrusting religious flyers into your hand outside the station while a confused mix of weed and burning incense fills your nostrils. Drunken revellers falling out of late night chicken shops, discarding bones and ketchup-stained napkins along the pavement as they stagger home.

Want to transport yourself away from the strip of chaos that is Kingsland High Street for a few hours? Follow me.

Halfway down Bradbury street sits Dalston Jazz Bar, a seafood and music lover's haven. I try booking online the week before, only to be told the next available table is six weeks from now. So we boldly try our luck at 7pm on a Saturday night.

A small queue has formed at the entrance and when the door opens, a gust of wind fills the restaurant and we're hit by the heady scent of fresh fish. It's warming and welcoming and my heart (and stomach) are set on eating here tonight.

To our surprise, the waitress tells us she has a table for us. Given our timing and the fact the restaurant can't seat more than 25 people, we can't help but feel we've hit the jackpot. The jazz band plays away expertly in the corner, loud enough for us to enjoy but quiet enough to continue our conversation. White tablecloths, vintage posters on the walls, a bustling atmosphere: it's more Parisian bistro than Dalston dive bar. Before we've even ordered, I know this place is going to be up there on my list of top London restaurants.

We steal a crumpled menu from the table next to us as the waitress, who is absolutely lovely, advises us on how much to order. There are just five options on the menu and all of them are designed for two or more people to share. The strangest part? There are no prices. Flip to the back of the menu and you're asked to pay what you think the meal is worth, factoring in the live jazz and service charge. Unheard of in London, but it only adds to the wholesome, community vibe of the place.

One seafood platter and a bottle of vinho verde, please – hold the oysters. I wish my tastebuds were sophisticated enough to appreciate the slippery little molluscs, but they're not.

As we're sipping wine and discussing holiday plans, the first "course" – of what we quickly realise is more of a set menu than a mere platter – appears in front of us.

The menu describes it as filled smoked salmon, but it's a kind of salmon and prawn tartare. Whatever it is, it's light and moreish. I find it difficult to put my fork down, particularly as I'm blissfully unaware of how much food is yet to come.

The plate, which could have been licked clean, is whisked away and replaced by a huge bowl of mussels swimming in a creamy sauce. Steam rises as though from a hot bath. Two hunks of bread are placed next to it, ready to be smothered in sauce to within an inch of their life. There are more than enough mussels for the two of us, but we slowly make our way through them, conscious not to fill up on bread.

Then, when I'm seriously considering unbuckling my belt, the final plate arrives: king prawns in a rich tomato sauce. Huge, fist-sized prawns. They've clearly overestimated our appetites; a rarity for a London restaurant.

We leave happy, full and not a whole lot poorer. If I could make one request, it would be for some aioli on the side of the prawns for dipping. Oh, and for the waiter not to have presented us with the bill while there were still prawns to be demolished and wine sitting in the bottle because they needed our table back. We'd been there just over an hour which, given the amount of food served to us, seemed a little unreasonable. I guess while they might not put a price on dining at Dalston Jazz Bar, they will put a time limit on it. But the restaurant is so lovely, I'm reluctant to dock more than a few points.

If you can't book a table online, swing by and try your luck. Failing that, fill up on dumplings at House of Momo a few doors down and come back after 10pm, when I'm reliably told that the tables are whisked away to make room for drinks and dancing.

Until next time, Dalston Jazz Bar. The hunt for a bigger prawn continues.