

UNDER *the* BRIDGE

Meet the community bringing new life to the Old Union Yard Arches on Southwark's Union Street

Words: MADELEINE HOWELL

Change is afoot in SE1. For too long has the South Bank reigned supreme. Now, thanks to the regeneration of Flat Iron Square and the Old Union Yard Arches, it's time for the southerly Bankside to shine. Already home to such attractions as Borough Market, Shakespeare's Globe and the Tate Modern, the changes are set to cement its position as one of London's hottest spots for a day out.

It's a place where the arts sit alongside artisan food. But as one of the oldest settlements in Britain, it seems only right that newcomers should remain true to the history of the south east Londoners that reside there. Balancing change and investment with authenticity is a precarious task, but after meeting with five of the residents, I would argue that they have struck a considered balance between old and new.



Sasha Regan and her daughter, Nellie

Treading the boards

The Old Union Theatre is headed up by Sasha Regan and her partner Neil Moors. Regan set up the fringe theatre back in 1998, in an old warehouse across the road. Now, she is excited to have taken over a larger space, and will continue to nurture affordable off-West End theatre.

'We get people on their own, retired people, couples and kids coming in – it's a safe, warm environment. Everyone's welcome,' she says. Every Sunday, the youth theatre ushers in kids from the local area, who build their confidence in singing, dancing, improvisation and television workshops. At the time of writing, they're working on *Seussical the Musical*.

There's no dearth of variety, with a Psychic Night in the diary with medium Nikki Kitt on 2 April and a show called *HONK!* set to dazzle the kids over the Easter holidays. Written by Britain's prolific musical theatre duo Stiles and Drewe, it's running until 22 April.

Book tickets at uniontheatre.biz



A taste of Italy

Italian restaurant Macellaio (pronounced match-eh-lyo – ‘butcher’ in Italian) boasts an on-site, open butchery, bakery and dining theatre, the result being that lucky diners are fully immersed in the experience of Italian cuisine. The stand-out offering is the meat, which is cured to perfection.

‘We source everything from Italy,’ says founder Roberto Costa. ‘Lots of the produce is from a region called the Langhe in Piedmont, famous for its white truffles. Authenticity is so important,’ he continues. The oil is from Tuscany, the vinegar from Modena, and the pasta from his hometown, Genoa.

‘We want to be ambassadors for our country. Every single product has an amazing person or story behind it,’ he enthuses. Costa himself returns often – he was in Italy three days before our shoot to meet with the people running the farms. His own favourite dishes on the menu include rib eye on the bone and the latte dolce fritto – which, he says, reminds him of his childhood.

Visit macellaioirc.com to reserve a table

A cup of rosy lea

Adjacent to the Old Union Theatre is the Over the Road café, run by Southwark resident Ian Groombridge. Having been attached to the theatre for over 18 years, Groombridge works closely with the thespian side of things, and has even been known to step in to help out with the odd production.

It’s not your average chain coffee shop, and the space harks back to a bygone era. ‘I would describe us as old school,’ laughs Groombridge. ‘This sort of place would have been the norm back when things weren’t so expensive.

‘These days, this is a desirable part of London – which is great, and change is good – but we also want to try and keep the soul of the place.’ It’s a quest that’s close to Groombridge’s heart. ‘I’ve got a very strong affiliation to the area,’ he admits. ‘It’s where I’m from. My grandparents were dockers. I’m flying the flag for Southwark, but from Chaucer all the way through to Shakespeare, we’ve always been lucky with our residents. We’ll have them – we’ll call them ours,’ he jokes.

Now there’s food for thought...





Walking in the air

Flying Fantastic specialise in aerial fitness, and are making waves in London with their fresh take infused with circus skills, tricks and acrobatics. They started out in Battersea, and also offer classes in Wimbledon and Farringdon, but the arches have provided a truly fantastic height and space for them to extend their offering to south east Londoners. When I catch up with co-founder Edel Wigan, I am amazed at the variety of weird and wonderful aerial classes they offer. ‘There’s hoops, silks, trapeze, straps, ropes and aerial yoga,’ she lists. ‘We do plenty of skills-based classes teaching tricks and drops, but we also do a range of shorter, more intense conditioning classes that use the equipment for building up strength.’

Flying Fantastic are keen to include anyone and everyone, and have sought to make aerial fitness more accessible. They also run kids classes, and even mum and baby classes. ‘They’re slightly chaotic, but it’s great fun,’ she says.

It’s a whole body workout which leaves you lean and strong. According to Wigan, beginners are usually amazed at what they can already achieve when they first come to the mat. ‘We love that moment of – “I can’t believe I’ve just done that!”’ she says. ‘It’s hard, but you’ll be amazed at what you can do.’

Get involved at flyingfantastic.co.uk



Flying Fantastic are keen to include anyone and everyone in aerial fitness



Tel-Aviv inspired dining

Chef Eran Tibi has brought his passion for the food of sun-kissed Tel Aviv in Israel to the heart of Southwark with Bala Baya. Food is available from midday until midnight at any time of the day, with an expanded menu from 6pm. ‘Kitchen closed is not in my vocabulary,’ he explains proudly. ‘We’ve taken the open kitchen to the next level, with no hidden spaces.’

Split into two levels, downstairs is buzzy and fun. Customers are surrounded by chefs and can have a gander at the bakery, where what Tibi describes as the ‘best pitta bread on the market’ is made. Upstairs has a rooftop feel, and is decked with desert plants.

The restaurateur – a protégée of Yotam Ottolenghi, no less – is proud to stand alongside passionate neighbours. ‘I really believe in their talent to bring in the footfall. It’s not a high street or an alley – it’s an alley in an alley in an alley – but it’s going to be a destination in its own right,’ he says.

Visit balabaya.co.uk to book a table

