

On the road with St John

Last month St John's Fergus Henderson and Trevor Gulliver embarked on a tour of the US ahead of its plans to open a restaurant stateside. We tagged along to eat bone marrow, drink 'Fergronis' and gauge America's appetite for the nose-to-tail supremos

Words/Joel Porter



Road trippin': Trevor and Fergus with the team in Chicago

Pilot lights: the Los Angeles dinner



It is with equal amounts of excitement and trepidation that I fly into New York to begin the trip of a lifetime: hitting the road with St John's Fergus Henderson and Trevor Gulliver as they embark on a tour of the States to celebrate the US publication of their 25th anniversary cookbook, *The Book of St John*. The tour will take us to each of The Hoxton's four North American hotels - Williamsburg, Chicago, Portland, and Downtown LA - with a pop-up dinner in each city, plus book signings and talks in local bookshops along the way. Tickets for each dinner sold out within hours which, given the limited success British chefs have enjoyed in the US in recent years, is a feat that perhaps no other UK restaurant could pull off. Still, it will be fascinating to see how they are received in each city - and if I will survive what promises to be a wild ride across America with a couple of committed bon vivants.

New York

The tour begins with a bang. In the dining room of the Hoxton hotel in Williamsburg, the eating of calf's brains and supping of 'Fergronis' (Tanqueray, Punt e Mes, Campari, soda, and lemon zest for the uninitiated) is bought to an abrupt halt by Trevor bashing the table with a big silver ladle. As one half of the eminently

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recognisable duo behind St John, there were probably easier ways for him to get the attention of a room of die-hard fans, but it feels an appropriately uncompromising gesture - Trevor is not the kind of person to gently rattle a champagne flute with a spoon. Ladle in one hand, glass of wine in the other, he dispatches the formalities with ease before big plates piled high with bone marrow and toast, one of St John's many classic dishes on tonight's menu, hit the table.

Among the guests are many chefs and journalists, the great and the good from New York who have turned out for the dinner. I'm sat opposite Gabriel Stulman, the man behind a mini empire of New York restaurants that includes the acclaimed Sardine and Simon and The Whale. He's cancelled long-existing plans with visiting friends to be here for St John, which he describes as "an inspiration". I ask him why he thinks St John elicits such excitement stateside and he points enthusiastically to the philosophy Fergus pioneered 25 years ago. "They put British cooking on the map," he tells me. "They've got such a great international reputation because they are making food that has a sense of rooted terroir and authenticity, and is at the same time original."

Next up is little gem, anchovy, and tomato salad otherwise known as 'The Salad Which Saved My Life' owing to a time when eating this

Iconic: St John's bone marrow dish



Illinois eating: guests at the Chicago dinner



dish cured a particularly brutal hangover of Fergus'. With the wines already arriving at a blistering pace, I wonder if I should save some of this salad for tomorrow when its restorative powers may well be needed. The menu will stay the same in each city except for the pie, which tonight is a rich concoction of pigeon, pig's trotter and bacon, sitting underneath a layer of golden pastry.

The night rumbles on raucously. There are floating islands and freshly baked madeleines alongside dessert wines and at one point shots of tequila are passed around, perhaps instigated by Fergus himself. There is more ladle banging, shouting, and drinking long into the night before everything begins to blur....

Chicago

An 8:30am flight from La Guardia to Chicago is less than ideal the morning after a booze-fuelled dinner and multiple after-dinner drinks. But somehow we all make it on time, albeit bleary eyed. Waiting by the departure gate, Fergus is recognised by someone waiting for the same flight, who comes bounding over with an enthusiasm that defies the early hour. Ever the gentlemen, he talks with the man a few minutes - it turns out that, having failed to get a ticket in time for the New York dinner, he's flying to Chicago solo having snagged a spot for this one.

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If that's not testament to St John's rockstar status in America, I'm not sure what is.

His is not the only tale of the lengths people have gone to. Having sold out weeks in advance each city had a huge waitlist as latecomers began to email in droves begging to be let in. One person offered to name his soon-to-be-born first child after Fergus or Trevor if he could attend; a flattering offer that was nonetheless respectfully declined. Others simply wouldn't take no for an answer and turned up anyway, hanging around the lobby with the hope that a space opened up, the restaurant world equivalent of loitering by the backstage door hoping the band will sneak you in.

With the Hoxton Chicago offering the largest space, this is the biggest dinner of the tour with 100 people packed into the hotel's restaurant, Cira. Paul Kahan, one of Chicago's foremost chefs and a good friend of Trevor and Fergus', is here along with other top local chefs from hot spots such as Fat Rice and Monteverde. Chicago is a town that loves big, hearty food, so St John's menu of offal and pies feels especially fitting here, and tonight probably has the best atmosphere of the tour.

Portland

There is a small snag with the dinner in Portland, Oregon - nobody can track down calf brains anywhere in the city, so tonight's opening



Using its brains: diners sampled classic St John dishes



snack is to be quail instead. A worthy replacement but not quite the same statement of intent that comes from serving deep fried brains. No matter, the dinner is another roaring success, with Fergus and Trevor once again donned in their trademark suits and hosting the dinner with impeccable form.

Big name chefs from Portland attend - many of whom have staged at St John at least once in their career - and one of Trevor's worldly contacts, the creator of the Teletubbies Andrew Davenport (yes, really), even came out to play. For my part, I'm starting to feel the strain of the relentless pace, boozing, and eating and it is a marvel to watch them carry on performing night after night. I attempt to keep pace, but I guess I'm no match for a pair that would have given Oliver Reed a run for his money.


Los Angeles

The promise of blue skies and sunshine makes for an eagerly anticipated arrival in LA. Plus the city is something of a second home for St. John - the late LA Times restaurant critic Jonathan Gold was a dedicated follower and invited Fergus and Trevor to cook at the LA Food Bowl in 2017. And the pair have been visiting the city for many years and have lots of friends in the city, such as the chef Mary Sue Milliken who is in attendance at tonight's dinner.

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It's the last night of tour and the rooftop restaurant, Pilot, of the newly opened Hoxton in Downtown LA is a suitably special setting, backgrounded by the glittering sprawl of LA beneath us. For a city more readily associated with clean healthy living, the locals in attendance approach the dinner with a glee perhaps unrivalled by other cities. People really are excited to be here, genuinely honoured that St John has chosen to visit their hometown.

After the plates have been cleared the after-party continues at the rooftop bar, with wine, negronis, and mezcal flowing freely. With the last successful dinner wrapped up, it's a fittingly prolonged celebration into the early hours, with music and even dancing - Trevor, by the way, is a very accomplished dancer.

It's been a crazy week and we've all, just about, made it to the end in one piece. There may even be a few stories that didn't quite make it into print. Let's just say FedEx followed us around the country; coffee wasn't always the strongest drink at breakfast; and just a little bit of blood was spilled. But as the old saying goes: what goes on tour stays on tour... 

At the time of writing, Fergus Henderson and Trevor Gulliver's St John Group had intended to open a restaurant in Los Angeles in the coming months. However, due to ongoing events in the US as a result of Coronavirus, this project has been put on hold.