

WHERE TO EAT LONDON



richmond row cooks

blue ginger

LOUNGE AND GRILLE

written by Holly McWilliams
photography by Jackie Holte

Tucked in behind perhaps the only mature tree on Richmond Row is a graced-up, yellow-brick century dwelling, insulated by the strip's youngest restaurant, Blue Ginger.

Here as grooviest, clubbiest Richmond Street, that is everything. And where style counts, Blue Ginger's proprietor Sonya Steinberg knows a thing or two. The establish high-end fashion retailer and her son Mitchell—no stranger to cutting-edge himself—are back after a five-year hiatus from retailing in the town she says has been good to them. And once again, they're aiming the tonier Row set.

From their extensive travels through Asia and Europe, the Steinbergs have brought together all they saw and loved into Blue Ginger, their first foray into restauranting. Like the vendor's froggies playing paty-cake on the front terrace, the name is whimsical, but the word is hante all around...

"You eat with your eyes first" is a culinary credo of Sonya's, but Blue Ginger is a sort of restrained visual feast even before the food arrives.

Designed by London architect Brad Shinnick, this ambitious and stylishly off-kilter endeavor of the former Burning Man building signifies a major commitment to London's fine dining scene.



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Beginning with the concrete monoliths outside that bears its name right on down to the floorboards, staircase, menus, and, yes, even the vases and their minimalist floral arrangements—almost anywhere you look you find a gentle hypotenuse on a square, subtle enough to keep your equilibrium, yet deliberate enough for you to play spot-the-angle with your dining partners.

All mocha-grey, brushed steel and white lines, the lines and colours are clean and cool, if a bit chilly. The chairs, on the other hand, are roomy and accommodating, comfy enough to do the evening out, although you may want to migrate about. Says Mitchell, "Our customers might start the evening off downstairs, come upstairs after dinner for champagne or port with plates of cheese."

One of the most fun elements is the glassed garage door (il Gibson Gallery) on the main level that lets in lots of light and pulls up for evenings, opening onto the front terrace.

"The art is all local," says Steinberg, indicating her personal collection on the main floor, "and then we use upstairs as a gallery where the art will be rotating." A colorful oil donated by local artist Laurie Seaman is featured in the foyer will be raffled off in the grand opening event in September for the Brain Tumour Foundation.

"We're very conscious of tying back into the community," says Sonny. "It's really important right now for us that the community benefits as well." He's marvelling at the battle never satisfied any appetite I knew, it can certainly set an imaginative and colourful example, as it does at Blue Ginger. They are very intense about it in every way," says Sonny.

Out of an impossibly small but well-equipped kitchen, staffed by chef Todd Hoyles, a Newfoundland with Lonties who trained at Toronto's Metropolitan, and sous-chef Brian Long from The Arch Restaurant in Stratford, comes the really good stuff. As the name implies, Blue Ginger's cuisine leans far to the East for influences, culled from the chefs' journeys (and personal weaknesses), embellished by Hoyles, and bolstered by a state-of-the-art, infrared grill that heats up to blistering 400 degrees.

"I love the grilled portion of the menu," says Mitchell. "The steaks, the veal chops, the b...we wanted to fuse that with an Asian in a fine dining at-

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mosphere. So it's recognizable food, but presented at a level we haven't seen."

Indeed, sesame, lime, lemongrass, curry, cilantro, coconut, mango and like ingredients enliven most entrées on the lunch and dinner menus. Note that any deep-frying takes place in a highly refined peanut oil.

In keeping with the surroundings, food presentation has strong architectural lines. Right from the get-go, tiny, complimentary pots of bab-

ghanouj and sun-dried tomato tapenade are served with a distinctly angular collection of table breads.

Ditto the very popular Fire and Ice makis (seaweed and rice rolls) that arrive complete with pickled ginger and teriyaki dipping sauce. Differing from traditional Japanese makis, these gingery melt-in-your-mouth-fuls are tempura-fried, which breaks down the otherwise chewy nori wrapper.

There is a Mediterranean presence, too, in pastas, and in ingredients like pancetta in the Caesar salad, the carpaccio appetizer, cambozola-forked potatoes with the veal chop, and the rosemary-scented polenta that accompanies the Angus tenderloin.

The menu is backed up by an impressive wine list, heavy on hearty reds.

The upstairs bar and dining area is airy and so well ventilated, says Sonny, that cigar aficionados can indulge themselves without fear of upsetting others. **END**

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Limited parking in the rear