

Booking Office 1869: 'The style is Phileas Fogg Acid-Safari chic' - restaurant review



📍 Booking Office 1869, St Pancras, London NW1: 'A menu that's much more ostentatious than a railway station typically deserves.' Photograph: Ola O Smit/The Guardian

'Until now, I've never been truly excited by the food offering at St Pancras station. We're not at the Delice de France kiosk any more'

[Booking Office 1869](#) lives inside St Pancras International, which is that rarest of British railway stations in that it's a highly enjoyable one to linger in. Yes, Didcot Parkway will have its fans, but St Pancras is a destination in its own right, where splendid gothic 19th-century architecture meets shimmery luxury boutique shopping, and it's also colonised by chic Parisians awaiting the Eurostar and enjoying [the Tracey Emin light sculpture](#). At St Pancras, even the people clanking away on those public street pianos have a working knowledge of [Ludovico Einaudi](#).



That said, until now, I've never been truly excited by St Pancras's food offering, although the humongous Wetherspoons, [The Barrel Vault](#), on the ground floor is never anything short of heaving. However, the recent revamp of the Booking Office - a bistro on the first floor, but also accessible via the St Pancras hotel - is interesting for several reasons. At the helm is chef [Patrick Powell](#), who is also behind one of London's loveliest, and possibly most underrated fine dining experiences, [Allegra at The Stratford](#) next to the Olympic Park. Powell is a unique talent, and Allegra's menu is ever-intoxicating, mixing hearty Irish cooking with intricate French technique and tangential modernity: fried oysters with ginger and seaweed, lobster vol-au-vent with buttered leeks, and chicken in [vadouvan spices](#) with [pommes Pont Neuf](#) and pickled jalapeños, to name just three. Powell is a fan of classic cooking, but he's also a feeder and a creator of lavish comfort food.



Powell's menu at The Booking Office 1869 is less fancy-dan, but only marginally so. Yes, there is a house burger and a caesar salad, but there is also poussin roasted over coal, monkfish curry and slow-roast lamb in chermoula. It's a menu that's much more ostentatious than a railway station typically deserves, and it's made all the more gloriously incongruent by Parisian interior designer Hugo Toro's lavish rethink of the space. Behold, the 8m palm trees and the animal-print armchairs alongside turquoise tiling, which all combine to create a style vibe I'm calling Phileas Fogg Acid-Safari chic. What's more, the place takes its cocktail list as seriously as [the Savoy's American Bar](#), so if you were to order, say, an Ol' Signalman - made from pecan-infused bourbon, Cocchi Rosa and coconut bitters - a man will appear tableside with a blowtorch and start scorching the caramelised pecan nut garnish with both aplomb and due care for your eyebrows.

Yes, we are dining in a railway station, but we're not at the [Delice de France](#) kiosk any more, people. I mean, there's even a raw bar with Irish oysters and tuna skewers with daikon. Those skewers, incidentally, are one of the best things on the menu: top-notch fresh sashimi, all rich with white soy, miso and sesame seeds. The moment I ate it, I thought, OK, this has heavy shades of Allegra. The same goes for the dainty gildas featuring salty anchovy, an olive and a pickled chilli, while the humbly named "fried chicken" turns out to be a painstakingly boned bird, breadcrumbed, deep-fried and served with a lime-infused yoghurt dip.



Of all the starters, though, don't miss out on the cashew hummus. Yes, I know: hummus. Bad hummus is soul-zapping, but good, silky, nutty, oily hummus, such as the one here, is an emotional experience, plus it is topped with a soft-boiled egg and wisps of sliced pickled radish. A Tuscan brussels sprout salad follows with dried chicken skin, dried cranberries and fresh pecorino, all unusual partners for sprouts, which are perhaps a little al dente if you're planning to mix in polite society afterwards. A plate of cured salmon, chopped and served tartare style, comes with a rösti, the sliced potato erected into a fabulous and delicious turbo-chip. I've had similar elsewhere, sure, but I will never tire of spud-based architecture.



The Booking Office is not a sedate, genteel restaurant; it is a decidedly lively, slightly noisy, serious cocktail bar that's filled with well-heeled commuters and guests from the St Pancras hotel, and that boasts one of the best menus within a two-mile radius, an area where competition is fierce yet very hit-and-miss. I couldn't resist trying Powell's "fried fish sandwich", which turns out to be breadcrumbed halibut slices in a glossy steamed white bun with spicy homemade tartare containing fistfuls of gherkin; underneath the bonnet of the bun lies a thick layer of ready-salted crisps. Pudding was a slice of salted caramel tart that, while very edible, was perhaps not the most exciting or freshest I've ever eaten, and I still regret not opting for the rhubarb brioche doughnut with cinnamon cream.

But I will go back, because it's in St Pancras station, which I pass through several times a month, along with what feels like the rest of the planet during rush hour. I can't guarantee that it'll be any calmer in the Booking Office, but you'll get properly fed and they'll make you a very good cocktail.