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## The pub's progress

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### Two London examples show how the gastropub has become the British equivalent of the bistro or osteria

It's an oft-aided whinge that our heritage of authentic pubs is being eroded as they're all given a Farrow & Ball paint job and menus are chalked on to the walls. While it's true that some gastropubs have been cynical exercises in marketing by greedy chains, they've also been the engine of a huge success story in British dining.

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Today, gastropubs are part of our national infrastructure, and they continue to develop. "The near east" is the part of London where original pub culture was at its strongest and it's now gentrifying at a disorientating clip. Hackney and Dalston have got the pubs and the punters — surely, then, a good spot to look at the state of the gastropub and perhaps what's still to come.

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The Marksman must have been an "East End boozier" worthy of the name. It's a proper Victorian job with sanitary tiles, a curved entrance debouching on to the corner of two unprepossessing streets. In the "saloon" bar, a dome and lantern — one of those ecclesiastical quotes beloved of Victorian architects — may have been a subliminal reference to a disapproving deity, or might just have admitted enough light to stab someone by. Redecoration is restrained. The bar still functions as a bar and, on the night I went, had a couple of authentic-looking geezers propping it up (tweed caps and £2,000 leather jackets — either two Columbia Road market traders or Guy Ritchie and his pilates coach).

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The Marksman's chef/proprietors are Tom Harris, who was head chef at St John restaurant for eight years, and Jon Rotherham, former head chef at Jamie Oliver's Fifteen.

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The menu is short, delivering the New English vernacular elegantly yet with the muscular sparseness you'd expect from the chefs' pedigree.

Salt hake rissoles are neither fashionable croquetas nor yet the gastropub staple fishcake, but something between the two. Remarkably light in texture, The Marksman's rissoles proudly reappropriate the name, elevating the reviled staple of school, mess or works canteen to their rightful place.

Devilled crab on toast is often delivered as a mound of ingredients, the better to show off the simplicity of fresh crab, but when freshness is a given then Harris and Rotherham have sensibly worked out that the real elegance lies in the devilment. Red and white meat are thoroughly homogenised, spiced with creativity and then applied to the bread over a layer of fresh mayonnaise.

The beef and barley bun seems to have co-opted the technology of the *bao xi* steamed bun, wrapping the dough around a dark, shreddy beef stew and finished to a glazed, beigel-like crust.

I could expend 400 words on the many witty ways this item references ethnic cuisines of the East End but it is easier to point out that, served with fresh shaved horseradish and seemingly unalloyed clotted cream, it might be the most important thing to happen in the area since the jelling of the first eel.

There could be fewer things more determinedly gastropub than a pork chop and a bit of beef rump. In both cases, the meat has been chosen and cooked with the care you'd expect but it's the elegance of the accompaniments that lifts them beyond. The pork comes with cos lettuce, blowlamped to crisp carbonisation at the edges and mollified with a smooth mustard dressing; the beef is in a formal veal reduction, spiked with beetroot onion and anchovies.

History might look back on The Marksman as the place where the gastropub tide hit the high water mark. Harris and Rotherham were chefs at the peak of brilliant careers, they had CVs that would have assured backing for the most ludicrous exercises in chef ego. They could have demanded seven-seater shrines with 48-item tasting menus, arcane ingredients and secretive alchemical techniques. Instead, they bought a gastropub and did it better than anyone else.

The most refreshing thing is that very lack of hubris. They have recognised that feeding the public can be about working with a canon of dishes in a respectable tradition. There is no element of "Hey, look at us!", no pursuit of novelty or "twists". It's cooking that seeks respect rather than attention. If the gastropub can be considered a worthy platform by our most talented chefs, then it has truly come of age.

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It is a pity the traditional pub has lost so many of its social functions in the modern city. But it's heartening that much about their design, location and utility to the community still holds true. The British invented the pub, the purpose-built drinking and socialising emporium, while other nations had bars, bistros and osterias. For generations you could sit at one of these places on your holidays and bemoan the fact that while everyone else had ready access to steak frites and spaghetti carbonara in congenial, democratic eating spaces, we had warm bitter, pork scratchings and a fist-fight. Now our own cuisine has caught up, eating out has become a national pastime and it's all happening down the pub.