eat your greens

Seasonal and organic are the buzzwords at London's swish new green eatery

by **james aufenast**

Fresh produce on display at Acorn House

rthur Potts Dawson is stressed. Dressed in jeans, trainers and a sweatshirt, he looks like a typical laid-back, middle-aged Londoner. But business at his new Acorn House restaurant is brisk, and it's taking its toll on the head chef. 'We've been inundated. I'm working silly hours.'

Since its opening in November, people have flooded in after reading about its green approach. *The Times* described it as 'the most important restaurant to open in London in the last 200 years'. While some restaurants are listing more organic produce, Acorn House has taken the kind of leap that many people don't associate with places where they eat out. A restaurant that reuses and composts most of its waste gets you thinking. Behind the expensive crockery and zinc-back bars of most top dining rooms, there must be a great outpouring of waste.

Situated on a dark, gritty corner of King's Cross, an area better-known for its prostitutes, Acorn House is something you'd associate with Frankfurt or Zurich rather than London. Its white minimalist interior shines out against the grimly urban landscape through its large, nearly full-length windows. Built from organic and recycled materials, the sleek London eatery uses green electricity, buys Fairtrade, serves its own water, purified on site, and diners can order the dishes in any size to minimise wastage. There's a wormery for creating natural fertiliser for growing herbs, and wooden crates are reused for fruit and vegetables to reduce packaging. Produce is locally sourced, seasonal and organic where possible, and rather than the usual practice of each supplier delivering to the restaurant with their own van, one vehicle owned by the restaurant collects produce from several different producers in one journey. 'Any of our suppliers that doesn't comply is dumped,' says Potts Dawson, 'Either they're in on this with us, or they're out.'

The project isn't a matter of just good PR, although the effect has been for precisely that. 'We didn't do it to be trendy or cool. It's what we believe in,' he explains in his rapid-fire patter. 'I recycle at home, so we thought, why not take it to work?'

Acorn House was originally just intended to replicate Jamie Oliver's Fifteen restaurant as a training ground for under-privileged kids. It forms the ground floor of a building owned by the Aids charity the Terrence Higgins Trust. The Shoreditch Trust, a partner in Prue Leith's training programme for young chefs in Hoxton, is also involved in the project.

And Acorn House is not just a green haven; the food is excellent too, thanks to Potts Dawson's history in catering. He spent four years at the River Café, worked at the Michelin-starred La Tante Claire, and has cooked in France, Australia and New Zealand. Fish is organic, rather than wild, because it's far less of a gamble. 'I fished in Weymouth Harbour last year,' he says, 'and you smelt the pollution on the sea bass as soon as you brought it out.'

Organic and free-range are appealingly sexy labels right now, but there are more mundane details that make food truly green: if you're a vegetarian you may be wondering how green any restaurant with meat on the menu could be.

So what does he think about the fact that a calorie of meat takes 10 times more water to grow it than a calorie of grain? 'I don't know, I'm not a fucking scientist,' was his defensive reply.

But, ethical issues aside, meat organic or otherwise still uses more of the world's resources than crops or vegetables as well as being environmentally destructive. Does that influence his decisions at Acorn House? 'I'm not going to answer that,' he snaps, expertly changing the topic to 'how there will be no waste emanating from the restaurant by the middle of next year, and the way his fleet of vans will run on bio-fuel'.

Yet, in the current climate of all things green being fashionable, this wafer-thin environmentalism is the norm. But to be fair, a vegetarian can eat wild mushrooms and borlotti beans, then spinach, goats' cheese and rainbow chard frittata, followed by poached pear and toffee chestnuts at the restaurant. Potts Dawson's attitude is, 'Haven't we done enough?'

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