



Paul McKenna, the king of self-improvement, explains how you can have a more fulfilled 2016. Plus: we digest all the best new self-help books

Table Talk

Lurra
London W1

ATMOSPHERE ★★★★★
FOOD ★★★★★☆

AA GILL



You don't have to pay, you know. They can't force you to do the washing-up. You're not allowed to do a runner, though. You can't steal a meal, pretend you're going out for a smoke and never return, or swap the bill with someone who's only had a cup of coffee. But if it's not what you ordered and it wasn't everything you could reasonably expect, then you don't have to pay.

You have to tell the staff you're not happy, and it used to be a convention — I'm not sure if it was a rule — that you should at least fork out for the drinks and leave what you think the raw ingredients might have cost, along with a bona fide name and address. The restaurant then has the option to sue you through the small-claims court.

As a rule of burnt thumb, if you've eaten three courses with five mates and haven't sent anything back, had an anaphylactic attack or explosive diarrhoea, then the court is likely to find in favour of the restaurant.

A meal is a private contract between you and the dining room. Premeditatedly setting out to defraud is criminal. Not enjoying yourself is private. The fact that very few people refuse to pay in restaurants is because we all have an understanding of the business of hunger and hospitality, of cooking and waiting. And the real rules of communal eating are older and more deeply ingrained in us than the laws made up by fusty men in wigs.

I was once a bus boy at a restaurant in New York and a man came in and ate a big dinner, then brazenly told the waitress that he had no money and what was she going to do about it. He smiled with the entitlement of someone who has nothing to lose, but

the unassailable moral entitlement of boracic poverty in a city built on avaricious money-grubbing.

The waitress took a step back, put her hands on her hips and raised her voice above the clamour. She gave him the pithiest and best explanation and defence of capitalism I've ever heard. She pointed out that he wasn't taking back a little sustenance from an uncaring, rapacious system, but stealing the food from her child's plate, from the mouths of the Dominican immigrants working in the kitchen, that the system worked unevenly, but it was also the system that paid for and policed the city, where it was safe to eat in restaurants, where the chef couldn't just come out and stab him in the throat for cheating on his hard work and a lifetime's expertise.

It was also the capitalism that would give him a bucket and a mop, so he could clean the lavatory. It was capitalism that was big enough and charitable enough that he could also just walk out and leave and digest what he was really full of. The room fell utterly silent as the man walked out, the supercilious smile an agonised scar on his face.

I've always wondered what would happen if I just said: "I haven't got any money." I don't have to wonder any

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FROM THE MENU

STARTERS

Courgette flower with cod brandada
£7.50

Sourdough with bone marrow
£4.50

MAINS

Grilled octopus with piquillo sauce
£14

14-year-old Rubia Gallega "Galician blond" prime rib, grade 9
£68/kg

TOTAL

for two, including 12.5% service
£82

more. I got the bill at Lurra, put my hand into my inside pocket to retrieve my rather nice Anya Hindmarch wallet, with a crocodile cloaca on the inside, because — as Anya's inscription has it — "I'm the nicest arsehole in town", and found nothing but empty darkness. I went to draw the manageress's attention to my obvious demented forgetfulness, vainly imagining this might be the one time when it would be useful to drop my own name. She gave me a surprised but instantly forgiving look and asked what I was called.

"AA Gill."

"OK, Jill," she said with a strong Spanish accent. "You pay over the phone."

I called as soon as I got home. Her composure, easy kindness and good nature in the middle of a hectic service is another example of the older rules of hospitality — and the give implicit in capitalism. It also means that it feels I owe Lurra, but, luckily, I was already won over.

It's a very, very nice restaurant in that odd upmarket gastronomic pocket behind Edgware Road. They're selling Basque food. The continuing hegemony of the Spanish *cucina*, until recently, has been more the exercise of a type of meeting, shared, small collections of finger food that are really modish bar snacks, to go with liberal middle-class drinking, than an actual sense of the cuisine.

But now we're finding more committed regional restaurants. The Basques have been the most rarefied. This is smartly cool and elegantly modern, a couple of rooms without a single soft surface, and it is full of people who all adore the sound of ➤➤➤

their own voices. It is incredibly noisy. Luckily, the Blonde and I have the old couple's private slang of being able to communicate long and nuanced conversations using only facial muscles and exaggerated breathing.

The menu here is short, to the point of being rude, but it underlines that the kitchen has an attractive, taciturn self-confidence in its own brevity. We started with cods' throats, which I particularly loved — soft, slippery, brilliantly, freshly fishy. We got one each. Iberia owes a huge debt to cod: it was the reason they became such practised seamen and then global imperialists. Dried cod meant they could sail great distances without starving. Cod, incidentally, is a Middle English euphemism for a bag or a scrotum, and comes from the similarity of nut sacks to cods' swim bladders.

Then we had stuffed courgette flowers, which look a bit like a gynaecologist's drawing of lady bits. Never my favourite dish. This one was stuffed with the rest of the cod, a fishy brandade, and was rather good. Then a large swag of octopus tentacles, which looked like the head of a decapitated Rastafarian merman and were really, really delicious, beaten to a limpid softness and elegantly sauced.

Then, the real point of the evening — an old Spanish cow. Retired milking cows are the unlikely ingredient of the year. Every foodie is talking about little else. They're slaughtered at about 15 years old and are simply reminders of what beef should actually taste like, and the pathetic rapacious cynicism of our own butchery business, which kills everything as quickly as possible because it can't be bothered to look after living things. The steak on the bone for two costs £61, which is expensive, but immediately makes every other steak you've eaten this year seem like a waste of money.

The Blonde had a glass of Al Muvedre, which she said was very decent, but nothing like as decent as the wine waiter. The service all round, considering we arrived unannounced, in the middle of a bustling, crowded dinner and everything else they had to put up with afterwards, was really good; and, blissfully, there was no tapas in sight ■

Lurra, Marylebone

9 Seymour Place, London W1H 5BA; 020 7724 4545, lurra.co.uk. Mon: 6pm-10.30pm; Tue-Sat: noon-2.30pm, 6pm-10.30pm; Sun: 11am-3.30pm

SECOND HELPINGS

THREE OF THE BEST BASQUE RESTAURANTS

PINTURA, LEEDS

Basque cuisine gets a modern twist at Pintura (Spanish for "work of art"), which is big and buzzy. Unit 3.26, The Trinity, Leeds LS1 6AP; 0113 430 0915, pinturakitchen.co.uk

AMABI, COWES

Mixing Basque country cooking with fresh Isle of Wight produce, Amabi's pinchos, paella and baked local cheese have proved a hit. Shepards Wharf, Cowes, Isle of Wight PO31 7HT; 01983 716164, amabi.co.uk

LA BODEGA, MERTHYR TYDFIL

Serving tapas, Basque dishes and more familiar fare, this small eatery has been bringing a taste of Spain to Wales for 25 years. 1 Pant Road, Merthyr Tydfil, Wales CF48 3SH; 01685 384532, labodegamerthyr.co.uk

Barr Fly

How to tame a hangover



DAMIAN BARR

Drinking for a living, I have wisdom to help you survive even the most evil morning after. Like the drinks that landed you in this painful predicament, the hangover is both an art and a science. You'll need to use both sides of your presently arid, angry brain.

"Drink less," says Mike McAdams, co-founder of Drinkwel.com, which makes multivitamins for "healthy people who drink". "I know, you don't want to hear this, but do yourself a favour. Sometimes it's just about saying no to that last shot of Patron." On this, as so many things, I take the Oscar Wilde approach: I can resist everything except temptation (or tequila).

The principle behind Drinkwel and the proliferating range of semi-scientific hangover preventatives is based on limiting dehydration. "Take three capsules with food and water before drinking, and another three with water after your last drink," McAdams advises. The food and water does as much good as the pills.

Dioralyte is a trusted friend. "I take a sachet even after just a couple of drinks," says Sophie Bratt of the Oxo Tower. "It really helps, as do bananas."

My first pick is about prevention rather than cure (above). Ohayo — it means "good morning" in informal

CORPSE REVIVER NO 2

This classic "hair of the dog" cocktail is adapted from The Savoy Cocktail Book, which warns: "Four of these taken in swift succession will unrevive the corpse again." Still served at the Savoy, but easy to make at home.
30ml gin (use a dry gin, such as Beefeater)
30ml triple sec (any brand will do)
30ml Cocchi Americano
30ml fresh lemon juice (no pips)
1 dash absinthe (Chartreuse will do)
Shake all the ingredients with ice, strain into a chilled martini glass and garnish with orange peel



OHAYO

Top notes of Berocca give way to bitter milk thistle and an indeterminate medicinal flavour. Definitely tastes as if it's working. Serve cold. £14 for three bottles, ohayotomorrow.com

Japanese — is a self-proclaimed "super-hydrator". The drink is supposedly based on a potion concocted by hard-drinking, hard-working medical students. By necking a little bottle just before bed, you give your body a whole night to absorb the essentials it's packed with: mainly B vitamins. I have to say that it got me through a week of Christmas parties.

That's the science. Now the art. First, a historic hangover is something to be proud of. As with any near-death experience, it provides great stories and bestows cachet on the survivor. Second, this too shall pass. So you might as well revel by ordering a takeaway and marooning yourself on the couch (assuming you've had the foresight to book a day off). What you really need to take the edge off is a proper drink (top) ■

MUNDO DE YUNTERO ORGANIC AIREN SAUVIGNON BLANC 2014

Sometimes a white-wine spritzer is all you need. This bright white boasts green apple and crisp pear. Organic means lower in sulphites, making for a happier head. Serve 1/3 wine to 2/3 soda, adding ice, a lime wedge and a pinch of salt (trust me). £7.95, perfectcellar.com

