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# GATED COMMUNITY

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The Gate restaurant has been confounding people's expectations of vegetarian food for more than 25 years. The Journal pays a visit to its new Seymour Place branch to meet Michael Daniel, one of the brothers behind this brilliant, eccentric culinary institution

WORDS: CLARE FINNEY

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"I get the worst service here," says Michael Daniel apologetically, after five minutes spent trying, and failing, to attract his staff's attention. "They don't know if I'm here for pleasure, having a meeting or just sat here doing my thing." To be honest, I don't blame them: Michael neither looks nor sounds like the founder of one of London's first vegetarian restaurants, and when the waitress arrives (after I finally relieve his sore arm and his dignity by catching her eye) I start to wonder if I'm deceived myself. Certainly, health is not at the forefront of his mind as he orders "two chilli margaritas, please".

It's a Monday evening. We are, last time I checked, on Seymour

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Place, Marylebone, not on holiday in the Seychelles. Across the street Deliciously Ella's Mae Deli stands as a bricks and mortar testimony to a 'clean eating' (and drinking) movement which, without Michael and the vegetarian movement of the 1980s, would arguably never have begun. They wouldn't have these in Mae Deli, I think, as our delicious toxins arrive, salt crusting the edge, a slice of red chilli lending the glittering liquid a mischievous tint of Chanel rouge. "They created this cocktail for me. I'm obsessed with chillies. Cheers."

This is The Gate, Seymour Place: the third outpost of a restaurant which, like me, was born in Hammersmith over 25 years ago, and burnt down

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a week later. Okay, so I didn't burn down, but the hospital I was born in did, in an accident my mother describes as "no surprise, nor any great shame". It didn't reopen—unlike The Gate, which after a bit of work ("I thought the firemen would put the fire out. Not hack the kitchen to pieces," Michael grimaces) reopened the following January—the slowest month of the restaurant calendar. "We didn't know that at the time. We didn't know anything about restaurants. We just bought fruit, veg and pulses and had some family and friends over. For six months, that was the busiest we got."

They found themselves slowly, much as they had their vegetarianism—Adrian (Michael's older brother and co-founder) converted in his late teens after a childhood of the meat dishes that were the staple of their Iraqi-Jewish community. "Everything we ate growing up contained meat or fish. My mother had a repertoire of 20 dishes, six of which she'd do every Friday, when we always ate as a family for Shabbat." When Adrian turned vegetarian, aged 17, after a summer working at McDonald's and "a growing belief that the moral and ethical arguments against mass consumption of animals were right and compelling", she had no alternative but to adapt these dishes, conjuring flavours, textures and—crucially—appearances of such richness and beauty, their essence



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would go on to form the blueprint for The Gate's award-winning food.

"She was resistant at first—still is, sometimes," says Michael, with a grin. Only the other day she tried to pass off a chicken schnitzel as vegetarian. Yet the schnitzels and rich, hearty stews that have featured on The Gate's menu over the years owe their success to her. The brothers had no formal training—"I'd been a pot washer, which was more than Adrian had done"—but they reference their mother and grandmother often when it comes to cooking rice or working with spices.

"It's funny, sometimes I go to a restaurant and find Italian and Thai food on the same menu and think, what is this crap? This isn't a cuisine, it's a mish-mash. But that's what we do and it works for us, because of this central premise of producing good, exciting vegetarian food." Looked at this way, Thai green curry, wild mushroom risotto cake and tortillas are "branches of the same tree", informed by the brothers' upbringing, their travels and the gastronomic melting pot that is London.

They faced some significant hurdles: not only was their restaurant on a forgotten back street in Hammersmith, but they were part of the Rudolf Steiner Christian Community centre, cooking what was—back then, at least—a largely overlooked kind of food. "We were leafleting theatregoers at the Apollo before shows and rushing back in time for service. One day these guys came in who worked at a local music company and asked, 'do you take luncheon vouchers?' Me and Adrian looked at each other like, what the hell are they? then said, of course we do, sir!" Michael grins. "That got our lunchtimes going—only two to three pounds a head, but it was something."

Was the vegetarianism an impediment? "We didn't think about being veggies. We were just cooking our food in our space," says Michael. What bothered him was the "old world" regulations that kept them closed on Sundays and liquor-free for the first crucial years. "I thought, we have to dissociate ourselves from

the church, otherwise no one will come, so I had Led Zeppelin and the Rolling Stones blaring out all day," he laughs. Yet however loud it blared, Wild Horses could not stand in for the alcohol license which left their evening diners "in the back end of nowhere" with nothing to drink. "We didn't have much evening trade—just a trickle, really. If they wanted a drink, the nearest bottle of wine was at least 10 minutes away." In the end, they stashed a couple of bottles behind the bar, and gave it to those who asked. Free. "I can't sell you wine, but I can give you wine, I'd say and some would get it, and leave a tip after, and some would wonder what on earth we were doing."

Surely that couldn't work financially? "We didn't think like that. We didn't think about bottom lines and targets. We spent less than we made and we were there all the time," Michael shrugs. "Nothing came out of the kitchen that was less than what we thought it should be. We knew the food was wonderful, because we were there." While other chefs went travelling, Michael and his brother were "working all the time". "We did go to Glastonbury," he grins mischievously, and I smell a good story. "It wasn't official. We just took food and sold it. There were 10 of us, all running along a ditch with jerry cans of water and peas, looking for a place to get over the fence, and there was a guy running after us with a baseball bat, shouting at us. Adrian

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wanted to forget about it, but we finally got in and set up on the floor with our pots and pans." They sold two large pots of spinach dhal in less than two hours—"even though no one could see us!" Back at The Gate, it was business as slightly unusual until, a couple of years in, there was "a sense of, we can do this. This is actually going to carry on."

Vegetarianism was taking off. Mildreds had opened, and Manna—arguably London's oldest vegfest—was rebranding. Michael and Adrian may have been based in the back end of nowhere, but "we were getting a huge following. I knew almost everyone who came through the door, and the phone rang constantly," Michael recalls. In the end, they had to get a chef in to help them. While they may have started on a wing and a prayer, they'd become a benchmark for vegetarian food that could be "tasty, fresh, sexy and fun".

"If there was a deeper ethos than that, I don't think it would have worked," says Michael. "We didn't think too much about what went into a dish, so long as the flavours were right. To be healthy and happy is to enjoy food that's good for you—food that's visually and texturally pleasing." It's why the clean eating trend leaves him a little cold.

Does Michael feel the simple, ethical and environmentally-led choices he made in the 1980s have been tainted by the pursuit of 'wellness' via bone broth and spirulina? "It is definitely there. I can feel it," he muses, "but it's not going to take over, I don't think. There will always be people who just want to enjoy food. As society goes in one direction, exactly the opposite happens in another: there's 'clean eating', but burgers and chicken wings have never been bigger. There's feminism," he points out, "but the level of abuse of women on Twitter is terrible." Vegetarianism is complicated. It shouldn't be, but it's been co-opted by groups whose motives are subjective, and whose science is suspect: groups who condemn dairy, shun sugar—all sugar—and are convinced gluten is "sandpaper for the gut", as one

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popular health crusader put it.

“We’re so keen on labelling ourselves this or that—‘I don’t eat cheese’, ‘I don’t eat potatoes’, ‘I don’t eat meat substitutes’—but I’m not against anything if you enjoy it,” says Michael. Only this morning he was downstairs sampling seitan bacon, a potential idea for the brunch menu, and one which I immediately grimace at. If you’re vegetarian, be vegetarian, I say. I just can’t see the point of recreating meat from wheat.” At this, a nearby diner chips in: “It depends on your reason for being veggie,” she says. “I quite like mock meat dishes—I often have seitan.”

Natalie, who has been vegetarian since she was very young, is naturally

curious about meat dishes; it’s her views on animal welfare, rather than a dislike of the flavour, that put her off them: “Mock duck pancakes are delicious,” she continues, and Michael agrees. “Everything has a place at some point. I haven’t had seitan for years, but that bacon tasted pretty delicious.” I’m unconvinced—but then, I’m not that kind of vegetarian: if I have a sausage, it’ll be a real sausage, snuck from a buffet while tipsy. Sober, I’ve no real interest in eating meat.

For today’s vegetarians, stuffed peppers, quiches and nut wellingtons have, by and large, been replaced by dishes even meat eaters are tempted by. From Bernardi’s to Trishna, Picture to Vinopolis, every restaurant has alternatives now, or will be flexible about leaving ingredients out of a dish. Having more or less initiated the wave of vegetarian cuisine that wasn’t brown rice—that was “visually pleasing and tastebud-satisfying”—Michael accepts that it’s getting “harder and harder to ride”. It’s about health. It’s about good presentation. It’s about recognising that most vegetarians also like to indulge a bit—hello, Lyonnaise potatoes and polenta chips—but will likely frown on anything environmentally suspect. “There is that mindset. No one asks for bottled water here.”

He tries to define the mindset that “people walking into a vegetarian restaurant have, whether they’re veggie or not”, but he can’t pin it down much beyond good food and recycling. It is too nebulous. It is too broad a church, accommodating—in his generous, liberal view—everyone from Deliciously Ella, to Paul McCartney, to a rebellious, Rolling Stones-loving British-Iraqi-Jew who loves margaritas. “You know what? We are a restaurant serving tasty food, and we like sharing. That’s what we’re about,” he concludes finally.

In these fractious times, it is sentiment as warming as the chilli-tequila kickback. Cheers.

Adrian Daniel (left) and Michael Daniel, co-founders of The Gate



**THE GATE**  
22-24 Seymour Place, W1H 7NL  
020 7724 6656  
thegaterestaurants.com