

Going Out Food And Drink

They know their noodles

Restaurant Review

Koya ★★★★★☆

In Japan, noodles are a big deal. A huge, massive, obsession-creating deal. There are noodle otaku (nerds) with blogs debating the various pleasures of udon (fat, white wheat), ramen (recent Chinese upstarts, forever traduced by the Pot Noodle) and soba (supple, nutty buckwheat). Nondescript shopfronts have queues round the block because word has spread about their noodle-iciousness.

Here we're not so bothered, probably because all we've got to go by are the likes of Wagamama, serving pre-prepared noodles. In a David Cameron-ish aside, I once took a Japanese foodie friend to Wagamama and he spent the whole meal crying with laughter. The obsession may be heading our way, however: New Yorkers are already firmly in the grip of noodlemania and where they go we often trot obediently behind.

Now here's unassuming little Koya, in what used to be the Alastair Little restaurant in Soho. It's not much to look at behind its traditional noren curtain: bare walls and tiled floors, the odd little

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flower arrangement. But it's so worth venturing inside to discover what all the fuss is about.

I'm a long way from otaku (or even expert) status but I have eaten many a noodle in Tokyo and Kyoto. And I do know that, as with Koya, informal restaurants in Japan tend to focus on one thing – sushi, ramen, tempura – and do it brilliantly. Koya is an udon-ya (udon shop) specialising in the thick, wriggly Sanuki noodles of south-west Japan. And they're sensational.

Chefs Shuko Oda and Junya Yamasaki – who wears the coolest



Soho Sanuki: Koya serves traditional udon in seasonal ways

glasses I've ever seen – and boss John Devitt are otaku in the best possible way. Wheat for the udon is imported from Japan, as are katsuo-arabushi and souda-bushi (smoked and dried fish, variations on katsuobushi) and iriko (steamed and dried anchovy) for the all-important dashi stock, which like the noodles is freshly made daily in the traditional way. I haven't quite been able to confirm the rumour that the noodles are made by foot.

Udon are eaten in seasonal ways, hot in winter, cold in summer; the menu here covers all the bases. When hot, like our heavenly buta miso atsu-atsu (pork noodles in a milky miso and pork broth), they have to be eaten fast so the liquid stays hot and the noodles retain their koshi, or elasticity and toothsome bite.

Even more koshi are my cold zaru udon served as is traditional on a little bamboo mat with dashi dipping sauce laced with minced ginger, sesame and spring onion. Like eels, they wriggle away from my chopsticks and their slurpy,

lipstick-destroying, chewy suppleness is my new definition of addictive.

You can tart up your noodles with extra toppings, such as crispy tempura bits (tenkasu, here described as tanuki, or raccoon, their udon name) or onsen tamago (hot-spring egg) slowly cooked in a low-temperature bath, just like the famous onsen. Or mucousy, stinky natto (fermented soybeans). There are side dishes; we have duck breast in light soy with some fierce Japanese mustard and a terrifically good salad of tender leaves and deep-fried lotus root. Tempura is frilly and light – aubergine, massive prawns, meltingly sweet cod.

The place is rammed and endearing staff struggle to keep up. We talk briefly to Devitt, who seems a little bemused by his instant success. 'People come here and then keep coming back,' he says. 'I don't really know why.' Well, I do. *Marina O'Loughlin*
A meal for two with sake, beer and tip costs about £50.

49 Frith Street. www.koya.co.uk
Tube: Leicester Square

Gig The JD Set

Stylised retro comes with a quirky live twist in the form of The JD Set. Tonight's gig plays loud, proud homage to The Human League's classic 1981 album Dare: a



League doubles: The Infadels

benchmark in synth music, a precursor to new romanticism and a work of fabulous British pop. It's the London date of a branded series of gigs that also includes regional nights devoted to The Buzzcocks (Manchester) and Madonna (Glasgow). What makes Dare a particularly intriguing proposition is the fact The Human League's frontman Phil Oakey once claimed this was an 'untouchable' album that shouldn't be covered – The JD Set enlists an exuberant hotchpotch of acts to get their sticky mitts on songs such as Love Action (I Believe In Love), Don't You Want Me and The Sound Of The Crowd.

Tonight's line-up includes New York indie groovers Shy Child, Infadels, the new-look Pipettes (whose next album features Dare's original producer, Martin Rushent), alt-popsters the Shortwave Set and Kids On Bridges. At the show rehearsal sessions in Hackney, the atmosphere was like a rabble-rousing party with a collaborative cover of Together In Electric Dreams – which isn't actually on Dare at all but remains a loveable treat. This isn't one for po-faced purists, but expect pop passion, a few surprises, and irrepressible derring-do.

Arwa Haider
Tonight, Dingwalls, 8pm, free tickets available via www.thejdset.co.uk (limited tickets available on the door).
Tube: Camden Town

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Tube: Waterloo/Embankment

THEATRE
EURYDICE

The creators of The Brothers Size present a moving piece about the titular character's doomed love for Orpheus
Tonight until Jun 5, Young Vic, Mon to Sat 7.45pm (tonight 7pm), Wed and Sat mats 2.45pm, £17.50. Tel: 020 7922 2922.
www.youngvic.org
Tube: Waterloo/Southwark

DANCE
LES BALLETS C DE LA B

The company help Argentine dancer and choreographer Lisi Estaras recall her childhood in new show *Primero*
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www.sadlerswells.com Tube: Angel

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