

Counter culture

Back support is so last season

By Henry Wong

Side by side Joon digs Benny's buns



Where's the most glamorous place to eat in London? For a hot minute, it was The Dover. Martin Kuczmarski's New York hotspot in Mayfair, beloved by the fashion and celebrity set and anyone else looking for somewhere a little showy but also sexy, with good food. But these days, it might just be Dover Street Counter, the restaurant's recently opened companion site. The venue is next door, a little more playful and — dare we say it — more fun. Oh, and tables? Old news.

"I always try to 'listen' to the building," Kuczmarski tells me about the space, which is longer and narrower than its neighbour. So a countertop made sense, and Kuczmarski — who was inspired by Los Angeles diners of the 1950s — says that he worked to "rethink all the annoying parts you often associate with counter dining," such as uncomfortable seating (he tested about 11 different stools before landing on a custom design with armrests) and awkward eating arrangements (the ledge here is positioned "somewhere between a dining table and a traditional counter," he says). That, teamed with what Kuczmarski calls an "international room-service menu" (think cheeseburgers and tuna melts), has created a first-class dining experience. It's like eating in an Edward Hopper painting, but less depressing.

London has not traditionally been a source of great counters, unlike our European cousins. We don't have Rome's chic espresso pinotops, or Paris's abundance of high-top bars where you can order *le plat du jour*. Sure, there are a few foundational examples in this city — at Bar Italia's jostling ledge, Barrafina's marble slab, The Palomar's glamorous benchtop — but things might just be shifting. Also in Mayfair, there's Georgian restaurant DakkaDakka, as well as Asian-European Hausu in Peckham. From the high-top seats in both, you can see into the

kitchen. It's slightly higher pressure for the chefs, of course, but it's refreshing to see how your food is being prepared. And for cash-strapped diners, there's a sense that you're paying for more than just food. This is an experience. It's theatre.

However, I can't think of anywhere better for a dinner date — either an anniversary or if you want to impress on a first — than the sunshine-yellow counter at east London's Iranian-Iraqi joint Logma. You have to book space for dinner at this tiny venue, co-founded last year by Farsin Rabiee and Ziad Halub, and their Wednesday-night supper club might just be the hottest ticket in the city.

And, not for nothing: the angled mirror that hangs opposite the counter has to be the most flattering selfie opportunity in London. Rabiee tells me that he used to visit the counter at Soho's Iranian restaurant Berenjak, where you can see into the kitchen and watch the action while you eat. "With our counter, we wanted to create something slightly different," he says. "We put the mirror in front of it so guests face into it, and it naturally creates a more intimate atmosphere, good for date nights or romantic moments."

He's not wrong. However much they can improve the dining experience, what counters really do is elevate conversation. You can only do it properly in pairs, which means it's a catch-up with a close friend or a very fun suitor. There's something about not having to maintain direct eye contact that leads to a conspiratorial, sometimes confessional conversation. Recently, at one of Logma's supper clubs, two friends who were sitting at the communal table asked the staff if they could sit at the counter; they wanted to have a moment for themselves. "The vibe," Rabiee says, pointing out something both very simple and a little revelatory at the same time, "really does shift depending on where you sit."



High class From top: Hausu's countertop offers a view of the kitchen; the interior of Logma evokes Middle Eastern bistros; the 1950s-style Dover Street Counter