

Discover the hidden delights of the East End

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A walking food tour is a great way to explore a new area. Find a local guide with a good reputation who knows their home turf well and enjoys sharing those hidden gems off the beaten track, home to the independent restaurants and food producers you wouldn't otherwise hear about.

The East End of London lies east of the Roman and medieval walls of the City of London and north of the River Thames. Its emergence began in the Middle Ages and over time it became notorious for its poverty, overcrowding and associated social problems. Another major theme of the East End narrative has been the flow of migration, particularly evident in the area's lively food culture.

The spitel Fyeld



The Old Spitalfields Market, featuring pop-up foods stalls offering an international cuisine, as well as designers and makers of quality jewellery, clothing and furnishings, and regular specialist vinyl and antiques markets. Originally a Roman cemetery, in 1197 the land belonged to St Mary Spital, a priory or hospital run by a religious order in an area referred to as *The spitel Fyeld*. Covered with fields and nursery gardens until late in the 17th century when streets were laid out, it became home to the French Huguenot silk weavers, followed by the Irish weavers and the Jewish tailoring community.

A Royal Charter was granted to the area in 1622 and in 1938 it became the famous Spitalfields Fruit and Vegetable Market, trading until 1991. Miraculously, the market avoided bombing during World War II due to the fact it was a helpful landmark for enemy bombers, and the original structure remains intact today.

The great English writer and social critic, Charles Dickens, wrote extensively about the East End. The area still boasts an eclectic mix of architecture and a culture as diverse as its impressive history. The ambience is of a lively village and a bustling commercial community. A cautious development programme maintains the attractive blend of upmarket retailers, such as Chanel and gentleman's outfitters Hackett's, alongside artisan makers, independent cafés and restaurants.

The East End English Food Tour



I joined the tour which features seven courses at independent restaurants, food producers and sellers. Setting out from the Old Spitalfields Market, the first stop for a late breakfast is English restaurant St. John Bread and Wine. We tuck into freshly baked bread and home cured bacon. The bacon butties are popular, judging by a busy mid week clientele. St John's has won many accolades and awards. Under guidance from co-founder Fergus Henderson its philosophy is to use the whole pig 'from nose to tail.' Healthier options include St John Granola, Poached Quince and Yoghurt. The interior decor is minimalist with plain white walls, blackboard menus and basic tables and chairs, with the emphasis firmly on the food, which is excellent.

Dustman's Wedding Cake



The English Restaurant, is a prime example of the juxtaposition of the historic Spitalfields and the new development. The 16th century building sits determinedly next to a glass tower block. In the mid 20th century, it was the factory for Percy Dalton's roasted peanuts and the signage remains on the outside of the building. Our second course here is a traditional English Bread & Butter Pudding. This one is creamy with a golden, crispy top and a sweet eggy centre, served with pouring custard. Eating dessert at 11am is unusual but on first bite I decide this is definitely a good exception to the rule. Originally known as 'Dustman's Wedding Cake' the Bread & Butter Pudding was originally concocted to use up stale, leftover bread, although this one consists of a rich brioche and plump vine fruits.

Every building tells a story



The East End's social history is evident in its architecture enclosed in a relatively small area which makes it perfect for exploring on foot. The Jewish Soup Kitchen, established in 1902 continued to feed the poorer in the community until closure in 1992 and resonates with today's food banks. People were expected to bring their own bowl and spoon and there was no seating so food was consumed standing up.

Nearby, the former 19th century Providence Row Night Refuge For Deserving Men, Women and Children is now used for student accommodation for the LSE. Mary Kelly, a victim of the notorious Jack The Ripper, once sought refuge here. Signage for the separate entrances for Women and Men is still visible on the exterior of the building.

The Georgian East End



Princelet Street is a popular filming location, such as the successful *Vanity Fair* (2018) for television starring Olivia Cooke. The former homes of the wealthy Huguenots showcase some of the most beautiful Georgian houses in London. Properties can sell for £3m and residents include British celebrities. A private house originally owned by the Truman family, presents a scruffy, pink external appearance and is adapted frequently for different productions. The Truman brewing dynasty was the chief benefactor of the East End for many years and the famous brand remains in evidence throughout. The Georgian streets are an incongruous link, sandwiched between the Old Spitalfields Market and Brick Lane. This clash of cultures is a large part of the East End's charm.

The Quintessential British dish



The first UK fish and chip shop was apparently opened in the East End by a Jewish immigrant, Joseph Malin, and combined Portuguese fried fish with traditional Irish fried potatoes. At Poppie's Fish & Chips restaurant, established circa 1950s, the chips are fried in peanut oil for crispness – make sure you mention this if you have a nut allergy. The crispy battered fish is accompanied by the time-honoured mushy peas. The decor is quintessential Fifties and Sixties style. The walls are covered with black and white photographs of British stars of the era, including Morecambe and Wise, Arthur Askey and Diana Dors. On your way down to the basement loos look to your right and spot two original paintings by R Kray, one half of the Kray Twins, the notorious East End gangsters.

Cheese course



Next stop is Abondance to sample some tangy Roquefort and a creamy goat's cheese. The business was established by brothers, Alex and Leo Guarner, and specialises in artisan and seasonable cheeses. Leo is on hand to explain the particular production methods and special qualities of each. They also sell wine and the biscuits offered with the cheese, which were crisp and buttery.

Brick Lane, the curry capital of London



Around 1970 the Jewish presence diminished and the late 20th century saw the arrival of the Sylheti Bangladeshi community. Restaurants and specialist food shops line both sides of the street. The third course on the tour is Sylhety native dishes at [Aladin](#), one of three Brick Lane restaurants by the same owner, crowned “**Best Curry House in Brick Lane**” by Celebrity Chef Ainsley Harriott. The three freshly prepared dishes – one chicken, one lamb and a vegetable dish – vary in heat from mild to fiery Madras, enhanced with spices and coconut.

The East End Bye-gull



Having lost all track of courses by now, we make our way to [Beigel Bake](#). One of two remaining Jewish bakers in the district, they bake 24 hours, seven days a week. The distinctive breads are stuffed with authentic fillings of salt beef with very hot mustard and gherkins, or smoked salmon and cream cheese. We are offered just half a beigel (pronounced bye-gull) each to enjoy, which is plenty after the mini curry at Aladin.

Artist Community



At the Truman Bridge the Bangladeshi atmosphere gives way to the newest community to locate in the East End. Here you will find a vintage market, artists' studios, galleries, book shops and Brixton Food Hall. The colourful street art includes a giant mural of a bird by the Belgian artist, ROA. Often beautifully executed this art form adds further drama to the eclectic atmosphere.

Tea time



Pizzaeast is located in a former tea warehouse in Shoreditch. It is early afternoon and yet the restaurant is jam-packed, with a pleasantly lively atmosphere. Our final, dessert course is a salted caramel and chocolate tart served with Chantilly cream, and Earl Grey or English Afternoon tea in a 'proper' china teapot. This is not a typically English dessert but it is very good and rounds off the tour on a sweet note.

Top tip: Plan some time to go back and shop as this is not possible during the tour. The four-hour walk feels like a stroll around a vibrant and friendly village but there is so much to see and discover it makes the East End a destination you immediately want to revisit.

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About Irene Caswell

Irene Caswell is a writer and destination PR manager, having visited 19 countries and over 28 cities, so far. One of the most memorable trips was a 3,000 mile (4,828 km) ramble around Europe in a vintage sports car, crossing 11 borders in three weeks. The great wonders of the world are, well great, but it's the local festivities, people and food that really work the magic. She has tried camel riding, skiing, hiking up a mountain, sunset quad-biking in the Sinai desert, canoeing, snorkelling in the Red Sea and more. Some things she was

okay at, some not so, but what the heck, life's for living.

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