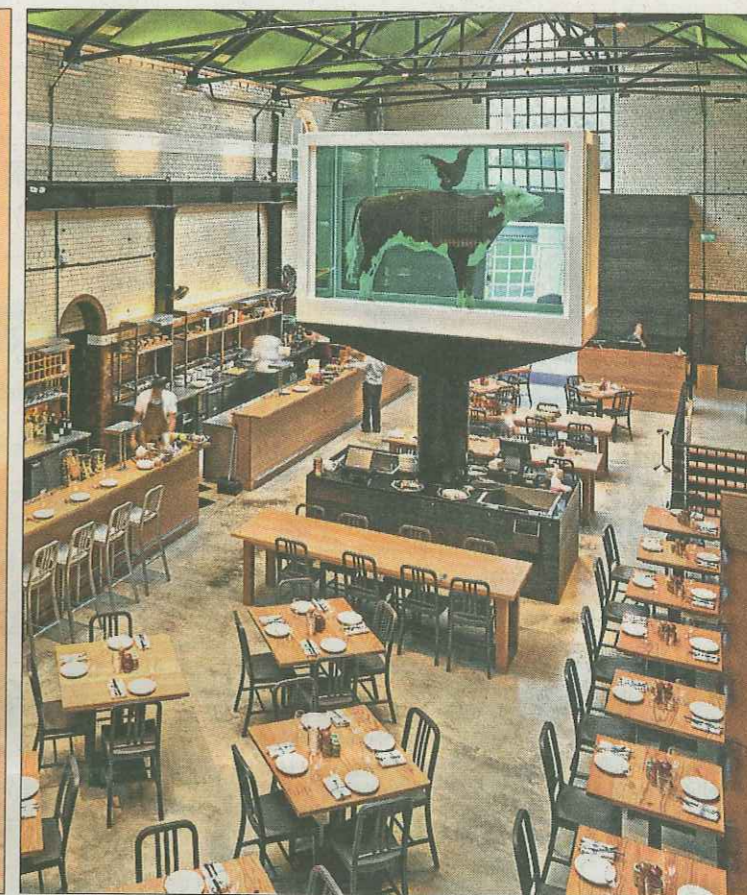
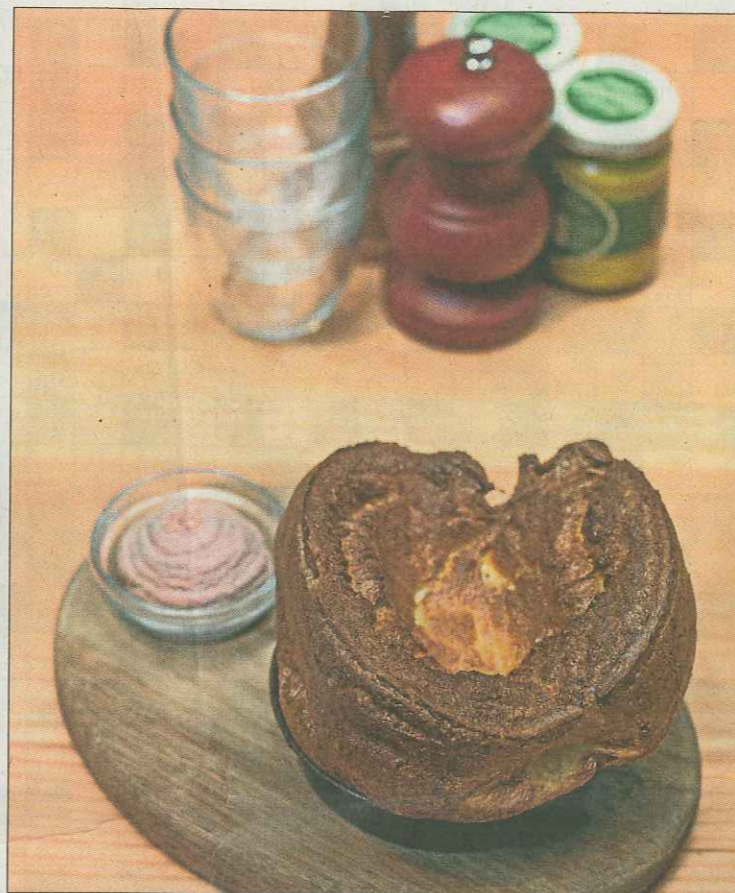
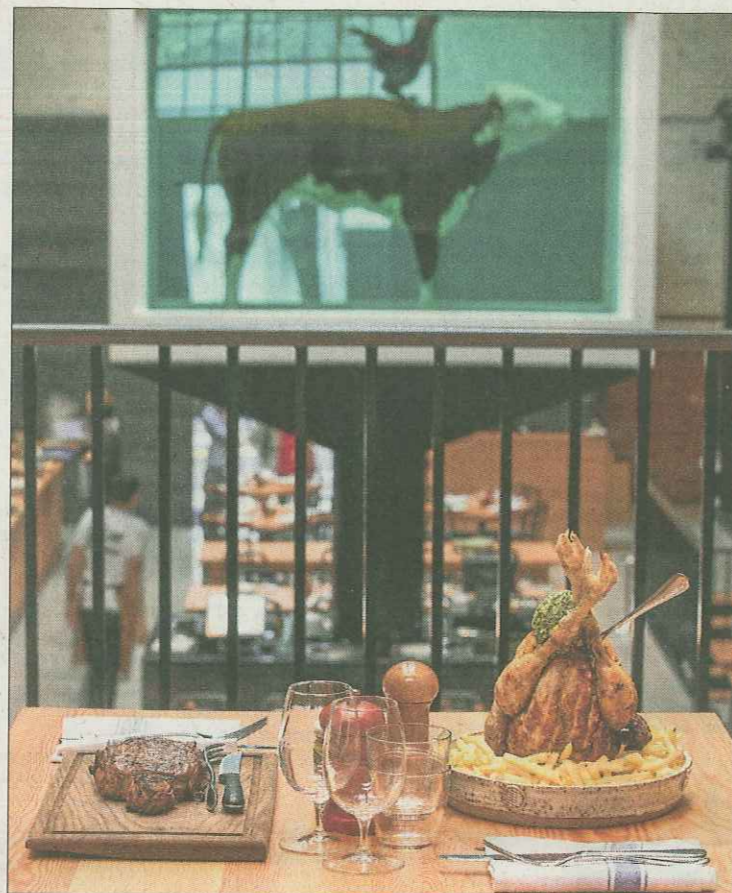


## Matthew Norman



ANDREW CROWLEY

## A cure for vegetarianism: criminally chickeny chicken

This week:  
**Tramshed,**  
London EC2

CRATING 9/10

Tramshed, 32 Rivington Street, London EC2A 3LX (020 7749 0478; chickenandsteak.co.uk). Three courses with wine and coffee: about £60 per head



Would you believe in a love at first sight?" the other three asked Ringo Starr in *With a Little Help From My Friends*, and in one of his tragically rare sorties into song the Beatles' drummer replied that he did. He was certain, in fact, that it happens all the time.

I'm not so sure. Only on the fingers of one hand (the hand in question belonging to a clumsy lumberjack or easily distracted lathe operator) could I count the number of times it's happened to me – in the restaurant realm at least. Sincerest thanks, then, to Mark Hix for restoring faith.

To walk through the door of the seventh venture in this busiest of bees' burgeoning portfolio is to be smitten – even if the gigantic room is far from conventionally romantic. Two-tone tiled walls, mosaic flooring, black girders and long, hanging lamps suggest an abattoir, though it was built in 1905 to generate electricity for trams. It retains the power to electrify, and we were humming like four little substations as we sat down.

"Fantastic," said one of us, and so it is. Flailing around for a moan, I said I thought the banquettes too big to make conversation easy. "I've never liked banquettes," my father muttered darkly, refusing to elaborate, as if long ago a banquettes did him a wrong so grievous that it still haunts him to this day.

Whether the room needs to ramp up the retro with its artwork is debatable. Set atop an RSJ raised above the central aisle, between the bar on one side and a row of (innocent-seeming) banquettes on the other, stands a Damien Hirst vitrine housing a cow with a chicken perched on its back. This lends the room the vivid feel of 2003, when Brit Art rocked and this bit of east London rolled on its tide of studied cool. The vitrine will not be to all tastes. But you can't have too many layers of nostalgia for mine. Besides, it offers a captivating example of culinary life imitating *passé art*. For the only mains served are ... chicken and steak.

The engagingly urchinesque Mr Hix, whose sterile Belgravia joint was lukewarmly reviewed here a few months ago, is at his best when at his simplest. Here he offers just three starters, which we had in a medley. The Waldorf salad was zingy and crunchy, and almost a palate cleanser for the other two. "Hix cured" smoked salmon on toast with mildly pickled cucumber was fine, though I found the salmon a bit too strong, but the highlight was a creation of lavish, if technically undemanding, brilliance. Towering, crunchy, and incredibly light Yorkshire pudding came

with frothy, subtle chicken livers whipped into a mousse. "You could come here just for this," said one of us, "and leave happy."

You could – but you'd be a fool to yourself if you did, because the roast chicken (Woolley Park Farm free range, to be pedantic), which arrived impaled on a spike in a vertical *Withmail & I*-style arrangement, feet still attached, was sensationally chickeny: the breast fleshy and juicy, the skin crispy and savoury, the sage and onion stuffing an earthy delight.

Legal scholars, though will note that a criminal offence was committed. Section 4 (c) iii of the British Poultry Act, 1993, states that any chicken reared in this realm must taste of solidified water, and that if one wants to consume chicken that tastes like chicken one must spend half one's monthly mortgage on a *recherché* French hen.

Better yet was the steak, available in four weights (we went for 750g), or "mighty marbled Glenarm sirloin" to dignify it with its full title. This arrived in a gratifyingly charred hunk, with a tangy Béarnaise sauce, before being exquisitely carved by a friend. The self-service here is outstanding, and so is the beef, cooked a deep pink medium rare. This had been aged for 28 days "in a Himalayan salt

chamber", and while by and large one much prefers an Andean salt chamber, it scaled a zenith of succulence, gentle gameness and flavoursome majesty. "Unbelievably good," said someone, "the quality of a chateaubriand." This someone thought that frying the chips in chicken fat rendered the taste overpowering, which provoked a brief round of "remember the old days when food tasted like food?" from the table elders.

The final stop on this blissful amble down memory lane took us to three no-nonsense, old-fashioned puds (apple and gooseberry pie with custard, raspberries with rippled ice cream and, best of all, milk chocolate fondue served with marshmallows and giant strawberries for suggestive dunking). We had worked our way through almost everything on offer, and the sole let-down had been one of those all-leaf salads that are such a transcendent waste of space.

The service was charming, the wine list is balanced and full of New World fun (we had a terrific Chilesan pinot noir at £30) and, all in all, Tramshed ranks among the most thrilling and adorable London newbies since Heston Blumenthal's Dinner. Even the startling paucity of available dishes suggests an added benefit. Anyone repenting at leisure their hasty marriage to a vegetarian might profitably bring their spouse here for the anniversary outing. That should do it.

Your table is ready