

SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA TRAVEL WRITERS

Taste of TRAVEL



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London's Soho: From Bunnies and Brothels to International Cuisine and Jazz

Savory dumplings in former opium dens, chocolate delicacies, gourmet gin and gin-infused beef pies. These were just a few of the delights promised in an "Eating London Tours" brochure that arrived in my inbox as John and I were preparing to leave for a five-week trip to the British Isles. Soho is one of London's oldest, liveliest and most diverse areas. Combining food with history and tastes of the latest things happening in Happening Soho piqued our interest. So we signed up for the Twilight Soho Food Tour.

Late one afternoon we met Joe Richardson, an actor and our knowledgeable guide for the three-and-a-half-hour walking tour, during which we feasted and drank at six unique establishments. The first bit of information we learned from Joe was that the name "So Ho" was originally a hunting cry used when a rabbit was sighted back in the 1600s, when this area of SW London belonged to a few very wealthy landowners. In later years, the area was neglected and became known for brothels, drugs and alcohol. Not long after, bohemian writers, artists and musicians moved in, relishing the low rents and creative camaraderie. During our walking tour, we saw evidence of those days as we passed the former residences of Mozart, Dylan Thomas, Karl Marx, and W.B. Yeats. R.L. Stevenson set Dr. Jekyll's home in what he describes as "the dismal quarter of Soho with its muddy ways and slatternly passengers."

Why the rich diversity of restaurants there now? Joe described the vast pool of immigrants who moved into this area over the centuries from France, Italy, Greece and elsewhere, bringing with them their varied cuisines. Following them were, of course, curious and hungry visitors and tourists like us.

Stop #1. **La Bodega Negra** is disguised as a strip club and adult sex shop, reveling in Soho's notorious past. As we entered the storefront, we descended into what is billed as



London's first authentic Mexican restaurant. Curiously enough, its owner is Winston Churchill's great grandson. Employees served us a variety of luscious tacos, including lamb with "drunken salsa," char-roasted mushroom, and prawn with spicy jicama, washed down with refreshing house margaritas.

Stop #2. **The London Gin Club**, a distillery and restaurant, presented us with the best gin and tonics we had ever tasted. The Club offers 270 types of gin, including some described as "botanical gin." Perhaps healthier? There's even a gin tasting class that uses terms such as "buttery," "creamy," or "orange peel essence," rivaling the lingo of Napa Valley wine aficionados. Accompanying our gin tastings were luscious meat pies consisting of gin-soaked, slow-braised beef served in butter-enriched pastry.

Stop #3. At **Enrique Tomas**, people were pressed against the front window watching an employee skillfully carve slices from an enormous pig leg. Famous in Spain, Enrique Tomas' family-run business has arrived in Soho, featuring a jamón tasting from pampered Iberian pigs that are raised on acorns and special diets. The meat is meticulously cured for 36 months. Some of it sells for 300 British pounds per kilo; an entire leg can cost 950 pounds.



Stop #4. **Pix Bar** is inspired by the Basque Country pintxo bars of Barcelona and San Sebastian. As throughout our food tour, gracious hosts offered us copious and varied samples of their wares. At Pix, counters were laden with Basque snacks, consisting of miniature tapas on wooden sticks, which we enjoyed lubricated with their Txakoli wine.



Stop #5. We slipped just over the edge of Soho to Chinatown's one square mile of delectable dim sum and a multitude of Chinese teas. At **Opium**, we climbed the narrow staircases feeling as though we were entering an Oriental opium den. This was likely true, as in the 1800s this area was home to opium dens galore. Both cocktail bar and restaurant, Opium consists of a labyrinth of small rooms, each with its

own mixologist and unique menu. Testifying to Soho's earlier incarnation as a theme park of brothels, Opium posts signs on its doors that say: "This is not a brothel. There are no prostitutes at this address."

Stop #6. Just when we all felt that we had no more room for food or drinks, our enthusiastic guide ushered us to our final tasting at **Said Chocolate**. An import from Rome, Said is said to be one of London's favorite dessert spots. We enjoyed the uniquely spiced hot chocolate, so thick it is best

eaten with a spoon, and the amazing tiramisu.

Walking along Soho's narrow alleys, we also passed Trident Studios, where the Beatles, Elton John and David Bowie recorded. Nearby is **Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club**, which has been going strong since 1959. It has hosted Ella Fitzgerald, Prince and Wynton Marsalis, as well as Jimi Hendrix's last public performance in 1970. We promised ourselves to come back another night.

As we said goodbye to our small group and thanked Joe, our terrific guide, London felt like a very different city. We felt closer to the many immigrants who had made their homes here, and the

many talented people who enriched our lives and palates.

For more information on Eating Europe Tours, which offers food tours in Rome, Amsterdam, Prague and London's East End and Soho, contact Wibke at www.eatingeuropetours.com.

Photos by Diane LeBow and John Montgomery



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*“One’s destination is never a place,
but rather a new way of looking at things.”*

—Henry Miller