

# Eating out Giles Coren

‘So you like cheap little places, not glitz, glamour and smoked yearling aardvark. Who knew?’

## Zia Lucia/Soutine

**M**an alive, you loved Balady, didn't you? That was the fantastic, no-frills Temple Fortune falafel place where you're in and out for less than a tenner that I wrote up three or four weeks ago, which had you cheering in your hundreds for, "Somewhere I can afford!", "Somewhere I can actually get into!" and "Somewhere I can go in my pants!"

I hear that the place has been full of *Times* readers ever since and I have to say I'm surprised. Mind you, the same thing happened when I did that lovely fish and chip shop in Killarney in March, whose name I can't even remember, and when I mentioned in passing the delights of the bog-cheap and brilliant Xi'an Impression. I had no idea you would all get so excited about keenly priced, accessible, local little places that any old fool could stumble into if they wanted. I thought you wanted glitz and glamour and celebs, sleek fittings, sexy postcodes, rare wines and dishes of smoked yearling aardvark, grated over simmering golden tureens of lightly poached orphan. Seventeen years in this job and I never knew!

But I know now, which is why, although I am taking Esther to Soutine in London's chichi St John's Wood for dinner tonight, you find

me at present shackled up in an inconspicuous little pizza joint called Zia Lucia, down the butt-end of Holloway Road, at 2 o'clock on a Wednesday afternoon, being completely ignored by a manager (or possibly owner) who, to be fair, is working the floor alone and has just had an enormous salad delivery.

I thought I'd come here because some say it has the best pizzas in London at the price (which starts at £6.90) and even more admit that it has the best bases, which are made from 48-hour slow-fermented sourdoughs of the finest flour you can import. So I'm about to have a really great, unpretentious, delicious, simple meal that I can't even finish for about 11 quid. And that, I now see, is all you have ever wanted.

Soutine, on the other hand, is the newest restaurant from Jeremy King and Chris Corbin of Ivy/Caprice/Wolseley/Delaunay/Zédel fame, fully open not even a week at the time of writing. It is on the site of an old Carluccio's that never really worked (none of them did, to be fair) and it has been magnificently overhauled to look like just the sexiest goddam Parisian café since 1920s Montparnasse (the sort of place frequented by the great Jewish Russian-French expressionist artist Chaïm Soutine, after whom, one assumes, the place is named).

Tonight there will be me and Esther, all dressed up because it's her birthday, at a big table of glamorous and influential friends, drinking perfect Manhattans and being a little nonplussed at the red maraschino cherries





**Zia Lucia (left)**  
157 Holloway Road,  
London N7 (020 7700  
3708; zialucia.com)  
**Cooking 8**  
**Truth 9**  
**Beauty 7**  
**Score 8**

**Soutine**  
60 St John's Wood High  
Street, London NW8  
(020 3926 8448;  
soutine.co.uk)  
**Cooking 8**  
**Beauty 9**  
**Truth 7**  
**Score 8**

(are the black ones on strike?), quaffing vintage Jacquesson in the warmly lit café or “artist’s room” at the front (the elegant, golden dining room lies deeper within), while legendary manager Daniel Craig (not that one, the cool one, who opened Colbert and has since been mainly at the Wolseley) and possibly Jeremy himself, nine feet tall in his black leather Oxfords and white-topped like Mont Blanc, shimmer around, ensuring that we are perfectly content with the food, the service and our place in the world.

In Holloway, meanwhile, I’m exchanging wary glances with two swart pizzaioli, beefy-armed and stubbly, wearing tight white T-shirts and white flat caps like extras in some Scorsese Neapolitan gangland epic. The manager (or possibly owner), bald as a nut in his big-collared white shirt and grey lamb’s wool V-neck like a pint-sized Gianluca Vialli (look him up if you’re not a football person), finally gets over to me, smiles his apology, corrects my pronunciation of “nduja” (I could have sworn the “j” was soft, but it’s always nice to be put right) and slips my order through to the hitmen stationed at the magnificent red-and-white striped pizza oven (we are barely six minutes’ walk from the Arsenal stadium).

I lean back against the bare brick, contemplate the high ceiling, stripy awning, oak floor, plain wooden tables and chairs, high shelves stacked with bottles and boxes and tins, filament bulbs, stacked boxes of produce, bottles of olive oil and balsamic

on each table, plus homemade chilli oil and carafes of water with long stalks of fresh mint in them. It feels quite Italian. For Holloway. Quite proper. The people now mostly finishing up are local NHS staff, students and some pretentious wanker restaurant critic with his laptop open in front of him. Oh, that’s a mirror.

This is the sort of place you people want to hear about, isn’t it? Not Soutine, where Esther will start with six little queen scallops from the Isle of Skye, served raw on the shell, on ice, up on a small trestle, like oysters, with a lemon herb dressing, sharp and sweet and clean and deliriously tasty for £10.75 (more than my nduja pizza) and I’ll have a globe artichoke, warm, with hollandaise for £10.25 (also more than my pizza) and there will be sweet, juicy escalopes de veau Viennoise in their crispy crumb at £21.75 – which is just about the price of three pizza margaritas at Zia Lucia that could easily feed a family of four, but goes so, so well with the Réserve de Leoville Barton 2014 we’ll be drinking because it is not too badly marked up at just under a ton a bottle.

Ooh, matey in the white shirt is on his way over with my pizza, which is bubbling and fizzing with heat like something lately pulled from the belly of the Flying Scotsman by a fireman with a long spade, which in a way it is, and the smell and the heat and the sweetness rise up and envelop me. The bread that puffs at the edges is the colour of desert sand and pocked with dark brown blisters.

After a minute or two it can be touched without pain and it tears like candyfloss. The chew is nutty and deep. I am not surprised it’s so famous. I know they do a gluten-free version and a wholemeal one and a vegetable charcoal dough with “digestive gas-absorbing capacities” but this traditional one, with its puffy flour-flesh of hot exquisititude, will have to be prised from my cold dead hands.

In the pizza itself, the tomato sauce is rich and tangy, not too sweet, the cheese is milky and ripe and strings like gum to my pull, the squirts of fiery sausage are deep crimson and peppery sweet. Fat leaves of basil lend mellowness. It is an incredible pizza. And it’s less than a tenner. And it’s too big for me to finish.

Which is just as well, because if I finish it, I will not have room for the filet de boeuf au poivre at Soutine (wonderful meat, perfectly rare, a little overenthusiastically peppered if you’re asking) or some of the crispiest pommes frites I have ever had, or the slivers of Esther’s sweet, fresh fillet of salmon with haricots verts and a tart little hollandaise sauce, or a wing of my friend James’s coq au riesling (yes, he slipped me some coq, but it was so big there was plenty to go round) with its captivately slick and complex sauce.

Oh God, and the petits pois à la française were so good, and the little shaved courgette salad and the elegant rectilinear salted caramel éclair and the round little personal Black Forest gâteau but, friends, I know you are not interested in this place because it is beautiful and new and is not a nailed-on budget option and, worst of all, it is full of people like me but, look, when you have eaten your beautifully made, honest, true and delicious pizza for the ages at Zia Lucia, with a salad and a glass of wine and had change out of £20, walk the three or four miles to St John’s Wood – you’ll need a walk after that pizza – and go to Soutine and sit down outside and order a coffee and tell them to bring you a tarte fine aux pommes.

At £5.75 it is big enough to feed two, it is round and golden and the pastry is light and crispy and the paper-thin apple slices dominoed round it are soft and tangy and blacked on the edges in places, with a boule of vanilla ice cream on top and some slashes of caramel sauce and it is ... irreproachable.

So that’s two perfect restaurants for you, both brilliant and honest and true and wholehearted in everything they do. Toss a coin. ■