

Ob-la-di, ob-la-da: Life goes on in London's colorful Portobello Marketplace

by *Maureen Nevin Duffy*

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LONDON - Most vacationers on organized tours long to break away from the group and interact with locals. In London it can be done for a half-hour ride on the No. 23 or 52 bus from Piccadilly Circus to Portobello Road.

West of Notting Hill Gate - which, prior to the Julia Roberts movie, was thought of as too suburban to be hip - is a rich tapestry of London life, from council housing and East Enders hawking their wares to trend-setting restaurants and restored villas draped in wisteria vines.

Weekdays, Portobello Road, originally named Porto Bello Lane for a Caribbean battle won by Admiral Vernon in 1739, rings with the calls of fruit and vegetable vendors: "Owz that, love? Your geeza treatin' you right then? Owz about two pounds 'o spuds for a quid? That'll put vim in his vigor all right."

The locals insist that the vitality of this marketplace inspired the Beatles to write "Ob-la-di, Ob-la-da." As in the song, husbands and wives take their turns minding the stalls and "the children lend a hand." The stalls line the road in front of the fish, meat and poultry shops, sharing the narrow lane with tables of eggs stacked in pyramids. Before the age of supermarkets these shops fed the economically mixed neighborhoods of Ladbroke Grove, Chepstow Villas and Pembridge.

This is also where Londoners buy their fish and chips, at George's - one of the few that serve rock salmon - on Portobello Road.

Currency can be exchanged here for the best rate in London. On a recent visit, Jan, who occupies a modest stand just past the Portobello Gold (good atmosphere and excellent California-style



food), was selling 66UKP for \$100, which equals a rate of \$1.515 to the pound with no commission. At this same time the Travelex window at Heathrow was paying only 61UKP per \$100, an exchange rate of \$1.56 plus a 3UKP commission; and some hotels wanted a whopping \$1.70 to the UKP, giving only 58UKP for \$100.

The 130-year-old Portobello Market is held on Saturdays only. Visitors squeeze past everything from 18th century furniture and other antiques to mobiles hammered out of old spoons, and painted light bulbs, some depicting "an entire African village."

The market begins at Portobello Green by the Ladbroke Grove tube station and stretches northeast toward Notting Hill and southwest down Golborne Road, where the fare dwindles to largely second hand clothing and used appliances. Between these points are found dolls and doll clothes, clocks, stamp and cigarette card collections, music boxes and the indispensable suits of armor.

Among rows of engravings, watches, muskets, china, porcelain and gold trinkets, lay endless opportunities. A keen eye will detect the hidden gems in boxes and bowls of jewelry; pick a brooch for a fiver or a ring for a pound. It's a hunt where the banter is part of the treasure. In a thick Cockney, the blonde proprietor chides a group of young men about their physiques: "You have almost instant muscles." As one replaces a ring, she teases, "Oh, you Dutch never want to part with the dosh," then slips into flawless Italian as she hands a well-dressed woman a plastic cup for her selections.

As the crowd moves up Portobello Road, street entertainers perform for tips: a didgeridoo soloist plays a tune from his latest CD; an Andes group fills the air with flute and guitar; and Lord Mustards appears from nowhere. As his cassette recorder pounds out tunes by Luke Kelly and the Original Dubliners, Mustards - officially crowned "King of the London Street Entertainers of 1974" - dances a makeshift jig for the passersby. The King, minus his customary green wig, regales the onlookers with tales of meeting Burl Ives

while riding boxcars through the American South during the '30s, and making commercials with George Burns and Walter Matthau to promote their movie, ``The Sunshine Boys."

As the skies darken, vendors drop their tarps and everyone disperses for the nearest tearoom or pub. Still Too Few is located a few steps below street level on Westbourne Grove, just before Catherine Buckley's remarkable dress shop. Inside, the aroma of fresh baked scones, pies and cakes, and the muffled chatter of excited diners, affords a cozy respite from the rain. Two full-sized sandwiches of cucumber, ham and cheese costs four pounds, including coffee or tea. For a pub, the Duke of Wellington is handy on the corner of Blenheim Crescent. Others take refuge in one of the specialty bookstores there, for advice on cooking, gardening or authentic period restorations.

The area abounds with formal dining choices as well. For the eccentric, there is the Market Bar, at Blenheim Crescent and Portobello, with its sculpture of plump babies in a horn shape, dangling precariously from its facade, and the First Floor, at 186 Portobello. The First Floor dining room is a subdued gothic. But on the upper floor, used for overflow and private parties, the decor turns rather macabre. Here, the humble wall crack is raised to seismic proportions and stuffed with pebbles and glittering rocks, with the occasional dripping head of a candle protruding. Voluminous amounts of wax also pour from candle stands and sconces adorning the rooms, which are furnished in dark heavy tables, chairs and couches. Fire laws? What fire laws?

However, the menu at the First Floor appears to reward the brave, with appetizers such as crab and salmon cakes on saffron aioli or roast duck and napa quesadilla served with pear and pine nut salsa (both 6.50UKP); and entrees such as red mullet on coconut rice with tomato and coriander sauce served with plantain crisps (14.75UKP), or pistachio and herb crusted lamb, sweet potato gratin with serrano

and cranberry jelly (14.95UKP).

Turning back down Blenheim Crescent, Kensington Park Road on the left is the de facto restaurant row, with choices to please any weary market-goer, including Cafe Rouge, which rarely disappoints, as well as the new Zilli. Zilli's menu is as offbeat as the market itself. In its own childlike words: ``This Black Flat Ribbon Pasta (Pappardelle) is made by us and the sauce of Prawns, Squid & Asparagus is a little spicy (yummy). For our carnivorous friends, why not go for this Garganelli with Italian Sausage Ragout? What about Baby Penne Arrabiata for simplicity?"

Sounds like a winner.

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