

# Restaurant review: HAWKSMOOR

by Guy Laffan

**If you live in London then you will know all about**

Hawksmoor. Its name is inspired by Nicholas Hawksmoor, the architect behind the imposing Christ Church in Spitalfields. The founders, Will Beckett and Huw Gott, founded the chain with their first restaurant in Spitalfields using a £20,000 loan from their parents. This soon evolved into four thriving restaurants and seven years and a financial crisis later, they sold the four-restaurant chain to the private equity firm Graphite Capital for a reported £35m. Not bad for 7 years work, right?

Hawksmoor is somewhat of a household name if you live anywhere inside the M25. During my short spell in London, my main vice was of course, the food, and boy was I glad I found Hawksmoor. It hits the spot on so many levels and I'll put my hands up and say, I for one love it.

They have several locations in London and have also opened in Manchester – a very promising sign for me sat here in Cardiff writing this. The 'chain effect' often finds its way to us in some way shape or form and I have everything crossed in anticipation of a Hawksmoor someday. Sadly, we seem to be getting over-run with Miller and Carter at the moment, to which I can only say... No comment.

My two favourite locations are Air Street and Seven Dials. Both have extremely imposing entrances that you're almost fearful to walk through, but once you're in, it almost feels like you've stepped into a time machine, and have been whisked back to a time gone by. Picture a 1920s art-deco-inspired 'secret club' of some description. It's almost like stepping into an exclusive members' only club – something owned by the likes of Al Capone. It's very, very slick. The décor is painfully tasteful and equally stylish. Everything in there compliments everything else perfectly and you can tell an awful lot of time, care, effort and unmistakably, money, went into the planning and interior design of each of the restaurants. Your eyes are instantly drawn to the deep brown herring bone flooring, while your hand glides along the polished brass



banister that are organically styled into the marble stair cases, which ooze with cosmopolitan grandeur. Stained glass door panels, green glass lampshades and dark mahogany green-leathered booths grab your attention from all angles. Something can catch your eye wherever you look... We're talking effortlessly cool.

The Hawksmoor team have obviously sought out very specific properties for Seven Dials and Air Street. Both resemble abandoned office or department stores that have left behind their exuberant and lavish features, installed when no expense was spared on interiors and style was of more value than substance.

I've personally been into Hawksmoor at all times of day, for both the food, and more shamelessly, the cocktails. It prides itself on its steak, and having eaten some pretty darn good steak in my life, I can confidently say that Hawksmoor are doing it exceptionally well. It's always a relief to see restaurants doing justice to such fantastic produce. The menus themselves are sensational.

When you read through you can't help but think rustic, hearty, wholesome and generally speaking, British. The starters include things like potted smoked mackerel, shrimps on toast and Old Spot pork belly ribs. There is also an exquisite selection of native seafood, served however which way you want, with a selection of sides to match. (I can't say I've ever tried the fish, but once you've tried the steak yourself you'll understand why.) The steak comes in

every cut and every size you can imagine. You can literally order however many grams of whatever cut you want – which genuinely had me in awe. We've all been there in the past – being served a golf ball sized fillet and feeling a deep sense of disappointment. Not at Hawksmoor, as you are in the driver's seat.

Now let me put this bluntly – the selection of sides is immense. My favourites being beef dripping fries, bone marrow, creamed spinach and lobster mac'n'cheese to name a few, but let me just make one thing clear – the absolute crowning glory for me is the bone marrow gravy. (I mainly say this because I'm Welsh and gravy after all is one of our main food groups).

My oh my is it good! My wife would have to hold me back if a pint of the stuff did actually arrive at our table. It's unctuously rich and leaves you wanting more. Which leads me onto my next point – the short rib French dip roll.

This, my friends, is a game changer. It's mind-blowingly good and as I'm sat here writing this, I'm desperately depressed there isn't one sat here with me. The picture alone is making my mouth water. This roll is as close to savoury gastronomic perfection as it gets. They generously anoint a soft sweet finger roll with slow-braised pulled beef short rib that has obviously been soaking in bone marrow gravy for hours.

The meat is then laden with cheese, which slowly melts into all the voids and out the sides, and is then served up with a pot of that same liquid-gold bone marrow gravy, for, of course,



## Shakey Petes Ginger Brew Recipe

### Blend together:

- Crushed ice
- 50ml Ginger syrup
- 50ml Lemon juice
- 35ml Gin
- 100ml Ale



dipping. By the time it reaches the table, the bread is soaked through with gravy and I kid you not, it is mind blowing. I dive straight in with my hands, but the more conservative eaters amongst us, wouldn't be blamed for using a knife and fork. This sublime creation is even in Time Out's 'Top Ten Dishes in London' and has somewhat of a following. Take my word for it and get one ASAP.

Now onto the cocktails. Cocktails have existed since the early creation of spirits, but have most certainly evolved to epic proportions here and now in the 21st century. Every bar you go to has a cocktail menu these days, but very few are as impressive and well thought out as the one at Hawksmoor. Theirs is divided up into times of day, including a section for the morning – my kind of place!

To give you an idea, in their own words they have taken "long-out-of-print cocktail books to resurrect some great long-lost classics." Reading the names and ingredients to some of the cocktails is actually really interesting and in some respects fascinating – some are a real glimpse into the past. My personal favourite is Shaky Pete's Ginger Brew – a gin and beer turbo-shandy cocktail, that I urge you to try. As with the food, they've really hit the nail on the head with the cocktail

menu, to which I can only say – Bravo!

I've managed to eat in all of the Hawksmoor restaurants and was equally impressed by each one. They all have their own little character and flare, and not just the generic stamp of tables, chairs and paintings that most chains can't seem to get away from.

Their greatness doesn't just stop at food, drink and décor. They hold four accolades that I am sure they are equally proud of: they have been listed in the Sunday Time's 'Best Companies' for 6 consecutive years; they've been shortlisted as one of the Most Sustainable Restaurant groups in the country by the Sustainable Restaurant Awards, being given an award by Action Against Hunger for passing £500,000 in fundraising and donations, and have been given the Marco Longari Award for Changing Lives for supporting One Water Foundation. They even have their own book! So not only are these guys rocking the restaurant business, but they're also trying to help the world in the most positive manner – something I personally feel is incredible.

The Hawksmoor founders, Will and Huw, have found a winning formula and despite selling their company, it's reassuring to see that the original blue print has been maintained. It can be a hostile world to survive in, particularly in London, so it's important to recognize when one does so well. I do hope they find their way over to Wales because I alone would probably keep the till full. There are so many amazing steak restaurants in London but Hawksmoor is literally the complete package. From the moment you arrive to the moment you leave, it's just a really lovely experience – the superb food and drinks are merely the flavoursome icing on the already delectable cake.

Keep it up guys. ■



My two favourites: French Dip roll and Shaky Pete's Ginger Brew.

