

Time Out, Wednesday 25 April, 2007

Eat London

by Natasha Polyviou

Each week in these pages we exhort you to enjoy this city glutted with mighty museums and unique happenings. This Saturday you can relish it in the most literal way imaginable as you ingest, digest and assimilate a little morsel of London into yourself.

'Eat London' is an early aspect of this year's Lift (London International Festival of Theatre). The project came about when Alicia Rios, a professional olive oil inspector with an artistic bent, blended her interests to make an edible art (first in Gran Canaria then Melbourne in 2004).

Working with architect Barbara Ortiz as Ali&Cia, she created a colossal 60 square metre map of central London. This was then split into 15 sections which community groups from south-east and east London will build up out of food. The resulting composite will be laid out in a vast spread in Trafalgar Square - and a frenzy of consuming will follow when spectators are given the go-ahead to take a taste.

So how did the groups, who have been working on the project for three months go about deciding what foodstuffs to employ for their section of the map? 'Many used visual clues and others the physical properties of the buildings,' explains Lift programme manager Nicky Petto. Nu-Life, a group of adults with learning disabilities, went on pure colour association to make the red-brick Royal Court Theatre out of toffee apples. Students from the Organic Training Café will pass comment on the people who pace the corridors of power by building the Houses of Parliament with wholemeal cucumber sandwiches. Others, like the Roj association of Kurdish and Turkish women, chose to express their cultural heritage: they'll be constructing St Paul's from baklava with a melon dome.

All the groups visited their assigned landmarks and, says Petto, 'the experience of the day they went to explore and how that translated' is part of their representation of the city. Our feelings towards the city are as mutable as the city itself, and luckily for the Bengali women's Coriander Club of Spitalfields City Farm, they had a glorious day to explore St James's Park. Based on this they've created Buckingham Palace out of mishti, expensive Indian sweets for a sweet, wealthy Queen.

In engaging with the task, 'groups began to talk about the food that means something to them and their experience of central London,' explains Petto.

'The ritual of sharing food is so strong. It brings a bridging and connection that doesn't happen in other ways, especially in a big city,' adds Lift's artistic director Angharad Wynne--ones. For example, when a group chanced upon a good idea, it was shared and rolled out across the entire map: unifying elements include gingerbread roads, liquorice

railway tracks, silver water cans for the Thames and red pepper London buses with olives for wheels.

The project is an ingenious way of making art more egalitarian. 'Everyone has a relationship with food,' says Wynne-Jones. 'People would put up international barriers if they were told to make a [conventional] sculpture.' The familiarity of the medium opens up art as a possibility to people who wouldn't necessarily see themselves as artistic.

Has Eat London become more about a process than the final, public event? 'That's the nature of cooking, as anyone who's prepared a meal will know!' Wynne-Jones comments. 'The preparation takes a long time but the gift is in the offer of it, the "here it is". Sharing is important but for participants the joys have already begun.'

If all that's made your stomach rumble, here's the programme details: refrigerated lorries arrive at 12noon to unload the map 'bearing tables; from 12.30pm the groups will demonstrate how they created the 3D maps; there are speeches and time to admire the work at 1pm; 2pm is chow time and everything must go by 4pm.

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