

18-22 MARCH

Evening Standard

## HOT TICKETS

## nightlife

## BARCODE

## JUST ORIENTAL

19 King Street, SW1 (020-7930 9292). Mon-Fri noon-11pm, Sat 6pm-11.30pm.

I have a picture in mind: dreamy images of the land of the rising sun, intricately decorated silk kimonos, pearls and oysters, chopsticks and sushi, wonderfully arcane myths and legends. I'm talking about the mysteries and wonders of the Orient, of course – the Orient as I imagined it might be before London was engulfed by a veritable tsunami of Oriental-style bars and restaurants. Today, it seems, it's not possible to go anywhere without being confronted by a deep-fried crouching tiger or a hidden dragon tempura in a teriyaki sauce. So much so that the next great thing to hit the high street is bound to be a chain of suck'n'go cabs called Orient Express. (Actually, there already exists an Orient Express kebab shop on Streatham High Road – I wonder if they've bothered to try and register the name?) For the meantime, at least, the latest offering of all things apparently Oriental in the bar world is housed in the basement of the recently established swanky restaurant Just St James. Basement

bars are notoriously difficult to make comfortable, yet the design of Just Oriental is a masterly example of what can be done to make a limited space seem lofty and grandiose. Scalloped booths, polished wooden floors adorned with authentic Oriental rugs, and reasonably complimentary lighting creates a heart-warmingly commodious environment that is within glass-chucking distance of the hustle and bustle of Piccadilly. It's table service, which is what you'd expect around these parts, and the staff, although miserably dressed in unflattering T-shirts, were eager and keen to please – bearing in mind both my visits were during its very early days, this is not unusual. The cocktails show promise, although need a little tuning-up, and the food – all Oriental plates – was pretty ordinary, actually. But this is an extraordinarily special venue which will undoubtedly prove to be a significant player on the St James's circuit of sophisticated bars, and I can't leave here with-

out taking you upstairs to the majestic grandeur of Just St James, where you can also pop in for drinks. This former banking hall – a one-time Herries, Farquhar & Co bank which handled the accounts of many a former prime minister, and was more recently a branch of Lloyd's – is now one of the most spectacular venues in London. High marble columns are softened with organza drapes, a mezzanine floor has been added to create the restaurant, and a pianola tinkles away all by itself providing a wonderfully composed atmosphere in which to enjoy the odd tittle or two. Drinks aren't especially expensive, with cocktails starting at £5.50, but the list makes the classic mistake of failing to distinguish between shooters, shorts and long drinks. Nine wines are available by the glass and start at £3.50 and bottled beers are £2.90. I could go on forever on the drop-dead gorgeousness of both of these venues. It's so rare to find a venue of such style that it makes a significant difference to London's eating and drinking world – Oriental or otherwise. EDWARD SULLIVAN



## BARS &amp; PUBS

EDWARD SULLIVAN

If you had spent a small fortune creating a new venue, you'd want to show it off in all its finery, invite some key movers and shakers, give 'em a good time, and ensure they want to come back again and spread the word to others. Seems reasonable to me. So why doesn't anyone do it right? The PR vision of a decent launch is to pack the venue with D-list imbeciles, make everyone wait aeons for a drink and then subject them to endless rounds of canapé calamities. And all of this with the builders still battering away around them in venues that look a long way from being finished. **THE WHITE HOUSE**, an about-to-be bar, restaurant and – yawn – members' bar on Clapham Park Road, held its launch party back in January, much to the disappointment

of a few of my mates who, despite my advice, went along to join the scrum. Delay followed further delay and the latest I have is that it was due to be open this week – but don't hold your breath.

Similarly, **10 COVENT GARDEN** in the former Connaught Rooms in Great Queen Street held a series of 'hard hat' parties towards the end of last year at which revellers were encouraged to admire the construction work going on around them. The opening was also delayed and the place finally opened its doors in February, offering a multi-venued unit including Kitchen (the restaurant), several bar areas and the gimmicky female-only members' bar. Despite reasonably concerted efforts to gain access, at the time of writing I hadn't managed to circumnavigate

the clipboard hell that is the door policy – watch this space.

The **CANDY BAR** has vacated its former home in Carlisle Street to take up residence in Bateman Street at the former home of Riki-Tik. Lesbian bars are as rare as Circle line trains in London, and it took a lesbian acquaintance of mine to explain this phenomenon. 'You do know what a lesbian brings with her on a second date, don't you?' I didn't. 'A suitcase containing all her worldly goods and enough money to pay half of her first month's council tax.' In Candy Bar's place is **POTION** which, hilariously, was turning away guests to its opening bash because the builders were still stitching the place together. Potion is such a small venue that nobody has really been able to make a success of it, so I doubt I'll be in any real rush to go back.

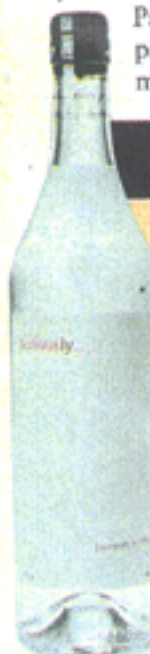
I did turn up to the launch of **JUST ORIENTAL** (see Barcode, above) but, stupidly, on the wrong

night. So, instead of wasting the trip, I journeyed back to Soho to see how **AMBER** was getting along since I reviewed the place a few weeks ago (see [www.thisislondon.com](http://www.thisislondon.com)). The basement bar was rocking, packed with the after-work crew having a thundering good time. After a few sharpeners I got up to leave, only to be stopped at the door by the bouncer. It turned out to be Ross Mackim, a guy who used to have to help me out of bars in my dark and distant past. For looking after me, past and present, he gets my Diamond Geezer Award. So you think I'm going soft in my advancing years by giving away an award, eh? Nah. I'm also giving out a Total Clot Award to the oxygen thief at Chelsea Village who considered rudeness as the best way to deal with me.

Looking ahead to this weekend, the residents of County Kilburn are already preparing for a right old hooley to celebrate St Patrick's Day. Virtually anywhere on Kilburn High Road will be celebrating the day but the best craic might be found at the **PORTERHOUSE** in Covent Garden's Maiden Lane.

Coming up next week is the **17th LONDON DRINKER BEER & CIDER FESTIVAL** organised by the North London branch of CAMRA. Dozens of ales, familiar and new, are promised over the three-day aleathon. Camden Centre, Bidborough Street, WC1, Wed 21 & Thur 22 Mar, noon-3pm & 5pm-10.30pm, Fri 23 Mar noon-10.30pm. For details, call 01727 867 201.

UP FOR  
BUT WHY  
LONDON'S TOP  
LISTINGS GUIDE



## SERIOUSLY GOOD VODKA

Here's a new kid hanging around the top of the vodka luge. Well, when I say new, I mean relatively new to London, at least. Seriously has been gracing Sweden's bars for more than a decade and it's only in the past six months that it's been making itself known to London's arbiters of style. You might argue that the differences in vodka brands are so miniscule – which is very much the case when you drown them with cola – that varying tastes are indecipherable to the human palate. But try taking it neat and you've got another story. Seriously

has a clean aroma with a curious hint of juniper and a taste of wheat (from which it is distilled), but without the usual 'bite' familiar with so many vodkas. Still, swallowing half a bottle of the stuff before bedtime gives you tingly lips and a slightly numb tongue and its purity reduces the hangover effect ever so slightly. Despite looking like a bottle of mineral water, this seriously good vodka is likely to be the next big thing behind London's bars. ES

Available from retail outlets: Harvey Nichols, Knightsbridge, SW1 (£15) and Corney & Barrow, Kensington Park Road, W11 (£16.20).