

hot tickets

EVENING STANDARD HOT TICKETS 8-14 FEBRUARY 2002

NIGHTLIFE 39

BAR CODE

THE SURPRISE

32 Bowling Green Lane, EC1 (020-7837 6273). Mon-Sat 11am-11pm, Sun noon-10.30pm.

Has anyone ever wondered why the price of a pint of pasteurised lager, with a seemingly infinite lifetime, is more expensive than a pint of the live product of a real ale which, after being tapped open, has a cellar life of only around four days? Doesn't seem to make sense, does it? The next time you fork out an extraordinarily high price for your pint of lager, you might want to consider that a sizeable proportion of that cost is going to fuel the advertising agencies' expense accounts. Yes, you are probably paying a fee to someone who is paid to tell you to buy the beer that you have just bought. Doesn't seem to make sense, does it? Meanwhile, the Campaign For Real Ale (CAMRA) have been battering away at our senses for the past three decades in a bid to get us to stay with our home-crafted product of cask ale, but seem to be struggling next to the huge advertising budgets of lager producers. Anyone who has ever been near the dreamy, picturesque town of Henley-On-Thames will know that this is an ale haven. The Brakspear brewery, in the heart of the town, owns just about every pub on every street corner, and nearly every one of them is a star turn. So when Brakspear recently acquired the Surprise, their second London outlet (the first being the Windsor Castle on Park Road, NW1), I was very keen to explore it. With Bowling Green Lane for a street name and the images of country life in the heart of Clerkenwell, how could a man resist? It serves Brakspear Bitter, of course, and the truly remarkable Coniston Bluebird. And

alongside these we have all the promotional material for Becardi Breezers, Smirnoff Ice and a parade of poor lagers. Seems to be sending out mixed messages, doesn't it? Think about it: have you ever been to a quality pub that features promotional material for jokey drinks in such prominent positions? No, of course you haven't. And this place is no exception. The only surprise about the Surprise is that it isn't in the middle of some social housing complex in a lost northern town. I'm talking three TV screens (all switched to different channels) violently competing with a dubious sound system, unwashed tables, silly patterned carpets, gaming machines, faux-Deco lampshades and chalkboards that seem to have been scrawled upon by a wayward art student. This is the moment I need to make a confession: I didn't sample the food for you. I couldn't. Honestly, I just couldn't. In this day and age of devastatingly good food in many pubs, I calculated that the risk really wasn't worth taking. Still, I managed to have a couple of fantastic pints of ale before trotting off to a better pub (for better pub, read any pub) nearby. I think my friends at CAMRA, and the quality brewer Brakspear, need to take a closer look at why cask ales are declining. Why do young people (who, after all, are their target market) have to suffer the ignominy of being seen in a place like the Surprise to enjoy a pint of ale? And this is precisely why so many of us punters are opting for more harmonious venues, even if they only serve lager.

SERIOUSLY PINKY

Valentine's Day will see the worldwide launch of a new Swedish vodka here in London. Seriously Pinky – perhaps not a name that will roll easily off the tongues of ruffly-tuffty types – is a pure distilled vodka, which has been infused with fresh seasonal botanicals to give it a pink hue and a different flavour to regular vodkas. It has the aroma of fresh red berries and, taken neat, the harshness of taste that is common with vodkas is softened by these botanicals. Although with a retail price anticipated to be around £20 per 70cl bottle (available from Harvey Nicks) this could turn out to be an expensive slamming session. But it's when mixed with soft drinks that Seriously Pinky comes into its own. In tonic water the botanicals seem to overpower the distinctive taste of quinine; in orange juice it appears to elevate a standard juice concentrate almost to the level of a freshly squeezed product. It will initially only be available in certain 'style' bars such as Attica, the Harrington Club, Harvey Nichols bars, the Sanderson and the St Martin's Lane Hotel. One day it might reach the Dock Road in Liverpool – but I somehow doubt it.



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