



CUISINE

FLYING SOUTH

What happens when you pair style, edge, art and design with a huge dose of fun, a dash of irony and some flavours from the Southern states? Giselle Whiteaker sees what's cooking at Absurd Bird.



Put a whimsical entrepreneur with a passion for food and a love of story-telling in a room with an American fine-dining chef, both of whom share a fondness for America's Deep South, add in a dash of street-food inspiration, and what you end up with is a rather unique addition to the Capital's foodie scene. Recently opened in an eclectic space a stone's throw from Spitalfields, Absurd Bird is worth a peek, and a peck, should you find yourself hungry in London town.

America's South is all about soul, whether

it's music, art or food, so any eatery featuring southern cuisine has got to be a bit different. Absurd Bird is not your starched white tablecloth, formally elegant, stiff upper lip kind of place. Instead, bare bulbs in gilded birdcages cast a warm glow over wooden tables and floorboards, in a cosy space that brings to mind a visit to the home of an eccentric grandmother. Red neon signs set above the booths along the wall bounce off vibrant red poles, and bird-watching binoculars dangle on chains

above, transformed into spot lighting. No matter where you look, there's something unexpected, yet in the right place; innovative, yet familiar; on trend, yet not pretentious.

And the food. Ah, the food.

The menu is like the ambiance: eclectic, humble, and downright delicious, with a good measure of creativity added in. The chicken is the highest grade of free-range, sourced from Fosse Meadows Farm, marinated in secret-recipe sauces, and dished in twisted

takes on Southern classics. The desserts are baked in-house and the cocktails are top notch, but it's the chicken and waffles that make me book a table. It's a dish I wanted to try while travelling in. Now, I have the chance somewhat closer to home.

Absurd Bird is just a few weeks old when my friend Darren and I pop in, but the staff has already hit their stride. Our friendly waitress, Kim gives an American-style introduction, without the fake enthusiasm, and tantalising aromas waft from the open kitchen at the rear, of the space. We quickly make our choices, starting with a rich Spinach and Artichoke Dip, served with crisp tortilla chips.

We know we've over-ordered when the offering from the Wingshack arrives. It's clear these enormous, meaty wings are from hearty, happy hens. Unable to choose just one flavour variation from the six options, we sample four, mixing and matching with three dipping sauces. The Smoked Wings have spent three hours in the smokehouse and the Smoked Garlic, Parmesan and Lemon Wings

are packed with flavour, but Darren has a penchant for the Pasha Heads East variety, which give a nod to Asian spices, while I'm besotted with the Buffalo Wings.

We could stop there. We probably should. But of course, we don't. Instead, we dig into a creamy Jalapeno Mac & Cheese, the hint of fire reviving our taste buds, before sampling the Dirty Buns: Asian-styled buns with fried chicken, spicy mayo and pickle. Darren immediately labels them "heaven," and I'm quick to agree.

Now we can't stop. We have to try the Chicken and Waffles. The generous portions of tender chicken soaked in buttermilk pre-frying sit on plump waffles and we drizzle the lot with smoked gravy and sweet syrup. It's an unusual combination, but it works. We have no chance of getting through it all, but Darren offers to give the leftovers the day-after taste test and they are promptly packed up to go.

There's just one thing left to do. Dessert. With

intriguing titles like Crack Pie and The Dipsy, how could we resist? Before I utter a word, Darren puts the order in; Peanut Butter Cheese Cake, with two spoons.

During the brief pause, I sip on Hooch. The lemon juice based cocktail pairs elderflower syrup with Absurd Bird's own moonshine and it's the perfect palate cleanser before the sweet finale.

As Kim places the wedge of cheese cake between us, Darren's eyes light up with anticipation and they practically roll backwards in delight as the first spoonful hits his tongue. "This is everything your mum told you not to do," he mumbles scooping another dollop into his mouth. "More-ish is an understatement."

It's so more-ish, in fact, that we're already planning to return. Every dish is a delight, but it's the Dirty Buns that call. And the mixology masters downstairs in Soulshakers, the hip cocktail lounge beneath the restaurant, may be our new best friends.

**SEE THE MENU OR MAKE A
BOOKING AT: ABSURDBIRD.COM**



JALAPEÑO MAC AND CHEESE

550g Macaroni
550ml Milk
250g Cheese
50g Flour
50g Butter
5g Salt
5g Spice Mix
5g Chopped Jalapeños

**SOUTHERN INSPIRED
RECIPE FROM
ABSURD BIRD**



Using a 5-litre pot, pour the milk inside and warm it to about 40 degrees. In a separate 5-litre pot, melt the butter and whisk in the flour until you have a smooth paste. Cook the flour-butter mixture on medium heat. Do not brown the mixture. Slowly pour in the warm milk and whisk until there are no lumps. If by chance you did not heat the milk properly and there are many lumps, pass this sauce through a sieve – you now have a roux.

Season and add your cheese to the roux to make it a cheese sauce. Drain, chop and add jalapeños. Cool it down in a fridge, with cling film placed directly on top to prevent a skin forming.

Boil the pasta in salted water for 6 minutes. Strain it and run it under hot water to get rid of the extra starch. When both the pasta and sauce are cooled, mix them together and place in aluminium trays. Place in a convection oven for 5 minutes at 200 degrees. The macaroni cheese should have a nice brown crust on the top.

