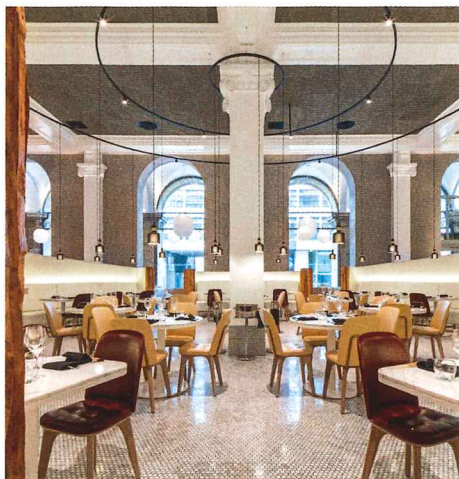
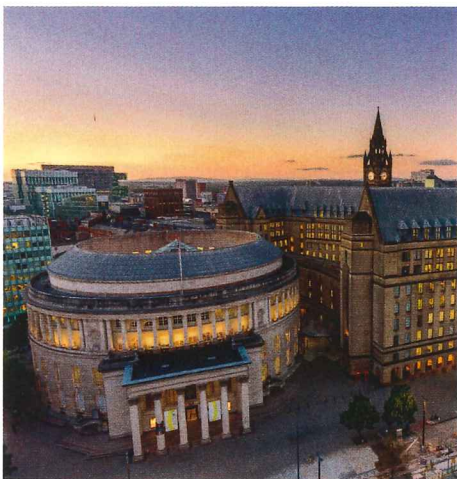




Manchester.



Words **Stephen Unwin**

There's a woman in Harvey Nichols with rollers in her hair. Her arms are drooping with expensive bags and she's getting spritzed by a man - face full of eyebrows - juggling all the right fragrances. She's umm-ing and ahh-ing and yes-ing to most of them. She's just popped in for the night from Alderley Edge and she'll swing by the fifth floor (window seat) for some Champagne (never prosecco) by which time those curls would've taken hold and she can go and meet the girls at her suite at the Gotham to finish getting ready to the greatest hits of Take That.

This is serious glamour, Manchester-style, where camp is never far off. Take the Gotham, that most-glamorous of Mancunian hotels housed in a glorious Edwin Lutyens building on the well fancy King Street with all the trimmings you'd expect from a five-star. Only the cheek of it! Your welcome glass(es) of fizz come with an outfit appraisal and a wink, the inner sanctum suites come with handcuffs because why not, you'll get a précis of the manager's goings on last night down Canal Street as you munch on your Bury Black Pudding over breakfast, heck he'll come join you tonight if you fancy the company. It's razzle and dazzle with all the pretentiousness knocked out of it.

Over at Peter Street Kitchen you've got one of the most glamorous new restaurants in the world. Like, seriously. Half-Mexican and half-Japanese (not a fusion, just a mix 'n' match) served in light-filled superstar-slick sanctum underneath the hallowed mouldings of the old Free Trade Hall, all the staff bar about three are local so your Chilean sea bass yasai zuke - which takes 72 hours to prepare - comes with that lovely, cheeky Manc drawl. And yeah, that probably is Dawn from the Real Housewives of Cheshire, mouthing off about something or other.

Or Tast, the newest and hottest Spanish restaurant in town, two minutes down King Street from Gotham, which is owned by Pep Guardiola who some might recognise from Manchester City while others just swoon at his salt 'n' pepper jolie-laide-ness. Pep will stick his head round the corner for a wave if he's not knocking about in his Kappa trackies down the Etihad (but won't stick around 'cause your dinner - sorry, 'tea' - is much more important). But then if you're not in the mood for fancy, there's always Bundobust in a grungy-cool basement on Piccadilly, where seriously good (and cheap!) Indian street food is served on communal tables like at school. Mind your head as you go down.

And sure, you've probably heard that the LGBTQ scene's moved over to the Northern Quarter which, in the 90s, was just known as that shithole where Affleck's Palace is. And yeah, it is all buzzy cafes and ironic bars and vegan diners and, oh yeah, this amazing dinky hotel called Cow Hollow that's like a tardis of cool, from the moment you enter its bleachers-style lobby where hot young things hang around drinking clever drinks and eating the free cookies right through to their ingeniously kitted-out urban-organic rooms.

But the (Gay) Village is still where it's at for us lot, that swathe of LGBTQ exploits on and around Canal Street, from The New Union to Rembrandts and back again via G-A-Y and Kiki and Via Fossa (though they may have dropped the 'Fossa') and Eagle and The Molly House. And sure, you may be jostling with L plates and angel wings of a Saturday night (Queer as Folk let the cat out of the bag way back in 2000) but it's still the most seriously fun gay night in town, and if you round it off with a McTucky's 7-piece chicken dinner at 4am so be it. Hell, get a side of gravy. When in the MCR...