

Slice of home: AA Gill at Shelter from the Storm, in King's Cross; right, with the Blonde and founders Sheila Scott and Louie Salvoni

PHOTOGRAPHS: RICK PUSHINSKY



Crumbs of comfort

AT A SHELTER FOR THE HOMELESS, AA GILL FOUND ORDINARY PEOPLE PREPARED TO DO SOMETHING EXTRAORDINARY — AND HAD ONE OF THE YEAR'S MOST MEMORABLE MEALS

There are many cities in this city. The Christmas city is not like the summer city. The tourists' city is very different from the commuters' city. There is a rich city and a poor city. There are those who live on top of it, and those who exist under it.

Sometimes, on a busy West End street, you catch sight of someone — a distressed girl sitting in a doorway, a man wearing a blanket, someone who is plainly not walking anywhere in particular, just moving, because the alternative is not moving — and, like drawing back a curtain, you realise that the streets you walk on are not the ones they walk on. The shop windows and the gusts of warmth from the doors, the smells from the cafes and the restaurants, have a different meaning for them.

We are each of us caught in the familiar runs of our particular place, and over time we imagine ours to be the real and authentic — the true — city. My city is overendowed with restaurants, an embarrassment of complicated food. The smiles of maître d's, the bustle of waiters. But I know that, out there, there are many, many people who never eat in restaurants, and there are some who rarely get to eat at a table.



Cooking up a storm: chefs prepare dinner at the shelter

**THE FOOD IS ALL
VERY GOOD. NOT
VERY GOOD FOR A
SOUP KITCHEN,
NOT GOOD FOR
FREE FOOD, JUST
VERY GOOD**

For as long as I've lived in London, there have been plans and promises to do something about the area around King's Cross. To get in the developers, the planners, the improvers, the decorators, the street-sweepers, but still it remains obstinately decrepit and deranged, cankered with the sores and blisters of negotiable sex and insistent drugs. This is a threatening, dank and malevolent place, bathed in piss-yellow light, where plastic bags are flayed on barbed wire. Along the streets of corrugated warehouses you still get glimpses of Gustave Doré's other world and Gissing's cannibalistic metropolis.

After a nervous quest, our echoing footsteps find the door lit with a pale sign that promises "Shelter from the Storm". You wouldn't get here by accident. They don't do passing trade. Shelter from the Storm is a little slice of home for the homeless. It does what it says on the door. The warmth and the light reach out and pull us in. The Blonde and I step into a room that was once industrial space, but is now a dining room, a living room, washroom and two dormitories for 18 men and 18 women for whom the city has no space or time.

It was started by Sheila Scott and Louie Salvoni. Sheila grew exasperated at her church's

lack of practical commitment to the desperate need of the streets, so rolled up her sleeves and unrolled her formidable face. Louie says he just got angry. That there were so many lost and wasted people out there, in this hugely indulgent city. It is a commonplace truism to talk of people like this as being extraordinary. They aren't. What they do is extraordinary. The act of day after day, week after week, every year, feeding and caring for the homeless is extraordinary. What is special about them is their decent, funny, earthy ordinariness. Shelter from the Storm takes all who are sent to them by the social services, from hospitals, from churches and the police. They are the hands that reach out across the parapet. There are no drugs here, and no drink, no violence, no sex, no acting out.

There is a telly with the football on. A computer. There's hot water and soap, and there's safety, and respite. There's a warm bed and a couple of saggy sofas. There's company for the runaway lads and the trafficked girls, for the old, the lonely, the lovelorn, the unlucky and the lost. What they get here is safety and help, a hand with jobs and appointments, with doctors and lawyers, with all the defeating bureaucracy of nothingness. And they get dinner.

The Blonde said this wasn't at all what she'd been expecting. She thought it would be solitary men hugging cups of soup in corners, the hunched and mumbling, crust-sucking flotsam. An open kitchen dominates the room. There are round tables with bright cloths. The communion of eating together is central to what this place does. This

*Chicken and rice with tomato salsa
was followed by plum crumble*



may be the first time in a day that these souls have sat with a kind word, and a fork.

Dinner is prepared by volunteers. Today it's chicken and rice with a spicy tomato salsa, followed by plum crumble. It's all very good. Not very good for a soup kitchen, not good for free food, just very good, made with care, and gusto, and there's lots of it, piled hot and steamy. I sit down next to an old man with a gold tooth — he tells me he's a Baptist minister; he has a church, but nowhere to sleep — and a neat and quiet lady with a sad smile. She's lost her job, and her home. She was a cleaner. She came here from Ghana a long time back, following a man who didn't work out. She's buried her family. There's nobody left. To be African without a family is a peculiarly terrible cross. I talked to her about

Accra, but the memory of her childhood overcomes her and, politely, with a whispering voice, her head drops, her hands cross neatly in her lap, and the tears trickle down her resolute African face. The gold-mouthed padre says, "Trust God. Trust him." She nods and sobs.

Chicken and rice, I say, idiotically, that's a combination made in heaven. Chicken and rice could be the national dish of west Africa. She stares at her untouched plate, and whispers, "Chicken and rice, made in heaven", and picks up her fork, as if it were weighed down with the cares of her threadbare life, and slowly, reluctantly, begins to eat. We all eat together in silence, ruminating on the blessings of chicken and rice. I thank God for chicken and rice, says the hedgerow priest.

Now, I don't know a damn about the mysterious ways of God, but I suppose it's no coincidence that at the heart of all religions there is food. The sharing of food. The act of feeding someone is the most basic transubstantiation. To make them whole, and well, to feed their future, and the hope for the better tomorrow. After five minutes, she looks up and smiles. The sadness isn't gone, but it's not despair, and we talk and laugh about the great, strong, loud, hard-handed, bright, big women of Ghana.

Shelter from the Storm gets a lot of its food from supermarkets and, in particular, a great deal of help from Pret A Manger, which takes on the homeless and gives them jobs. Everyone leaves in the morning with a Pret sandwich for their lunch. You might want to remember that when buying yours. This dinner, with the guests of Shelter from the Storm, and Sheila and Louie, was one of the most memorable I had this year. Of course it was. I was reminded why all the other dinners are good, bad and indifferent, and that everyone in this city should be able to sit down and eat in company once a day. It should be a basic citizen's right. We don't actually exist in different cities, we just choose to live selectively in the most expensive and beautifully appointed dining rooms. You still eat with the homeless, with the cleaning ladies and the tramp preachers, runaways and addict boys, and abused girls, the kicked out, the kicking, and the kicked. We all sit at the same table. We just choose not to see it. Shelter from the Storm could use some help. Not a lot. They're all volunteers. They get given stuff. They're good at asking. But they need a new van, and there are always expenses. Think about it. This isn't about feeling guilty, it's about feeling good, and full, and being part of it. ■

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2011'S WINNERS AND LOSERS

THE GOOD



Dinner by Heston Blumenthal

Mandarin Oriental, 66 Knightsbridge, SW1

★★★★★ FOOD ★★★★★ ATMOSPHERE

The pork chop with cabbage was deceptively straightforward, but as the retired Blue Peter presenter on the next table said to me with five o'clock awe: "It was the very essence of pork and chop. It could be the template for all porky chops."

The River Cafe Glasbury-on-Wye, Hereford

★★★★★ FOOD ★★★★★ ATMOSPHERE

The lasagne was exceedingly good. This is a dish that succeeds at engineering rather than inspiration: it has to have the right relationship between all its constituent parts, and they, in turn, must get on together but still be identifiably separate. Personally, I like an unctuous anointing of béchamel, and I got it.

Made in Camden Roundhouse, Chalk Farm Road, NW1

★★★★★ FOOD ★★★★★ ATMOSPHERE

Everything the performance space upstairs aspires to is being realised by the understudy in the cafeteria. This is where the real show is. It's multicultural, accessible, experimental without pomposity or exclusivity. It was humming. I suggest that the artistic director wake up and smell the miso purée.