

# Getting their ducks in a row: Clare Lattin and Tom Hill on their new bistro Camille



By Joe Lutrario

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The pair behind London's Ducksoup and Devon's Emilia have partnered with restaurant accountancy guru Ratnesh Bagdai to launch a proudly Francophile venture in Borough Market.

Devon restaurant Emilia opened in 2022 without so much as a press release and we get through a 45-minute interview about what can now safely be called their restaurant group – the pair also have Ducksoup and Little Duck The Picklery in London - without them even mentioning No. 14, the low-intervention wine bar and restaurant they launched down the road from Emilia last year.

The irony of an ex-restaurant publicist not chasing media coverage for her own places is not lost on Lattin. “This is the first time we have done PR for one of our restaurants in some time. Part of the reason we didn’t do anything for Emilia was that it’s a tiny place (around 20 covers) and there was a question mark over who we would PR it to given its location.”

“Emilia is doing well just through old school word of mouth,” Hill adds. “It did help that William Sitwell gave us a good review (in The Telegraph) but, as far as we know, that happened by chance.”



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## French fancies

But enough about Emilia. The restaurant **we're supposed to be focusing on is Camille**, which opened in Borough Market early this month and is being billed as a 'reflection of imagined jaunts through regional France'. As we arrive, the pair are putting the finishing touches to the site, which was most recently occupied by premium sandwich purveyor Sons + Daughters.

"We like to do as much as we can ourselves," says Lattin as she negotiates some homemade linen curtains onto a brass rail while Hill stands by to screw the other end into the wall. "Tom and I have always done things that are small with small budgets. We have to touch it and be involved in everything in order to believe in it and for it to be our restaurant. We try and do it all ourselves. We don't use restaurant designers and avoid using contractors where possible."

This DIY approach is a change of pace for Ratnesh Bagdai, who is partnering with Lattin and Hill on the Stoney Street venture having been looking after their books via his specialist restaurant accountancy firm RNB since the duo launched Ducksoup in 2011. As one of the founders of Brindisa Kitchens and an investor in several other larger scale projects – including upscale Windsor pub The Bailiwick and chef **Tom Brown's flash new Shoreditch restaurant Pearly Queen** – his builds are somewhat less hands on.

tom. They are seasoned operators. It's great to see them getting stuck in.

The trio have known each other for the best part of 20 years having all worked with Mark Hix back in the day. Bagdai worked alongside the high-profile chef while financial director at Caprice Holdings, Lattin oversaw his cookbook publicity and latterly his restaurant PR, and Hill held senior roles within a number of his kitchens (his cooking CV also includes stints with Mitch Tonks and at now closed Covent Garden restaurant Terroir).



### **An opportunity too good to miss**

Now based in Devon spending the bulk of their time working at Emilia, Lattin and Hill had not intended to launch a third restaurant in the capital.

“We thought we were done. But then Ratnesh came along, and here we are,” says Lattin shooting Bagdai a mock accusatory look. “But Tom and I had for some time dreamed about doing something French and it’s a great site. It wasn’t an opportunity we could say no to.”

opposite Camille) is our busiest site, we have been here for 20 years. I sometimes ask myself 'why do I keep doing more?'. I've been in this game a while and sometimes I feel a bit tired out by it all. But it's a lovely small site. It's manageable."

Camille was at least partly conceptualised in lockdown. Both Lattin and Hill happened to be reading Pierre Koffmann's (excellent) Memories of Gascony cookbook. "We started texting little paragraphs of it to each other. It's a beautiful book," says Hill. "It reminded us of the time we spent in France. We got talking about it and both said 'wouldn't it be lovely to do something like that?'".

Their new restaurant's name is also a nod to the great French chef – Camille was the name of his grandma. "It's got a nice ring to it and there's also a link with Emilia, which is named after the Italian region but is obviously also a girl's name. They both feel nice and round and soft," Lattin says.



### **Small is beautiful**

With Lattin and Hill in the West Country, Camille will be spearheaded by Meghan Morrell – who was recently promoted from Little Duck general manager to the now five-strong group’s operations manager – and chef Elliot Hashtroudi, who was most recently at wine bar 107 (the former P.Franco site in Hackney).

With 40-covers inside and a similar amount outside (the terrace will launch later this year), Camille is a tightly-run operation employing around a dozen staff in total with three in the kitchen and three to four out front on service. As things

“We do homely, small restaurants that aren't a headache to manage,” says Lattin. “We rarely have staffing issues because Tom and I can run our places on skeleton teams if necessary. It’s not like we need 10 people in the kitchen. Small is beautiful sometimes.”

The trio haven’t made any structural changes to the site and have largely retained the layout of its former occupant. Key changes include the addition of some dark wood panelling, a handsome cream and pillar box-red paint job that goes nicely with the site’s existing concrete floor, marble tables and pewter-topped bar.

Hashtroudi – whose cooking CV also includes nose-to-tail pioneer St John – has created a menu that is perfectly in step with Camille’s timeless Parisian bistro aesthetic.

“Elliot was a very lucky find for us,” Hill says. “His brief is simply provincial French cooking. That is the food he likes to cook anyway. It’s not classical cuisine as such, just rustic interesting dishes with a strong nod to France.” Hashtroudi has creative control in the kitchen, although the founders share ideas.

Made up of small plates, main course-sized dishes, and larger plates for sharing the daily-changing blackboard menu reads a treat: cured pig’s cheeks with walnut; trotter and parsley terrine; ox tongue with trompettes and riesling; fromage de tete with blood orange; langoustine cassoulet; lemon sole with snail butter; and burnt milk tart.

“When Elliott sent the first menu over Clare, Ratnesh and I just read it and nodded, there wasn't a single thing on there we didn't want to eat. It hits all the notes,” Hill adds.

Spend is anticipated to be a little higher than at Ducksoup and Raw Duck – which are broadly Mediterranean in their approach - due to the use of some



## **Pioneering natural wine in London and beyond**

Ducksoup was a forerunner in London's natural wine movement championing low-intervention at a time when the genre was in its infancy – on these shores, at least – and was not widely understood. Lattin and Hill's other restaurant projects have followed suit. Perhaps unsurprisingly, natural wine has been a tougher sell in south Devon than it has been in central and east London, but the pair have stuck to their guns.

"Things were a bit wobbly in Ashburton initially," Hill says. "The price point was actually the biggest issue – good natural wine is not cheap. A lot of the people that come to Emilia are used to paying £5 for a glass of wine. We have to think carefully about our margins there. It helps that our rents and rates are lower than in London."

"We've never really flown the flag for natural wine," Lattin interjects. "We actually try and steer clear of that term at our places. We just talk about how they are made, who makes them and what they taste like. It helps that we only

As at Ducksoup, Little Duck, Emilia, and no. 14, the wine list at Camille is overseen by Rory Moore (who is not to be confused with Rory McCoy, who parted ways with the group a few years back). As one might expect, the wine list at Camille has a strong focus on French producers.



## Changing places

Lattin initially worked front of house at her restaurants but has in recent years moved into the kitchen. In a normal week, she looks after all the pastry at Emilia as well as cooking on service – often side-by-side with Hill - a couple of times.

“When we launched Little Duck (in 2018) I took two sabbaticals from EightyFour (the restaurant PR company she set up with Fiona St George in 2010 and recently stepped away from) to go into the kitchen. When I moved to Devon, I told Tom that I just want to cook because it’s more fun and means I have to deal with fewer emails.”

planned to open another London site, it's no surprise that the pair have little appetite for adding any more restaurants to their collection any time soon. Or at least until Bagdai finds them another site they can't say no to.

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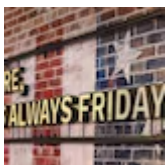


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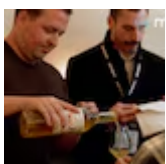
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