



# Farewell Daquise...

## A Friend, a Refuge, a Memory

Written by Andy Owen



There are some restaurants you *never* forget.

They shape your memories, not just your meals.

For me, three places in London defined what dining out meant at its very best: **La Perla** in Brewer Street, **Langan's Brasserie** in Stratton Street - and **Café Daquise** in Thurloe Street, South Kensington.

La Perla is long gone. Disappeared one Thursday morning in 2019.

I walked past at 11am on my way to a meeting. The shutters were down and the doors locked. I enjoyed that 'shrine' for close on 20 years and I never knew the windows had shutters.

And the door was always open.

On that day, I had a business lunch booked there. La Perla was my second home, even though I lived over 100 miles away.

I don't think I have ever got over that day. I lost a great friend.

I still walk into Brewer Street regularly. I stop and look at where Perla was, nearly every time.

Just over a mile west, up Piccadilly way, sat Langan's. It was an institution. A very special place. Here's a pic that sums it up:



My chums - Ian and Glenmore - and myself, paying homage to kindred spirits, Peter Langan and Richard Shepherd at Langan's a few years ago.

It was, as always, a rather wonderful lunch, fast-paced, positive and nostalgic, ably supported by the usual volume of quips and puns. We were roaring with laughter most of the time.

As it should be in a place like Langan's. And here's why...

When the renowned Brian Clivaz was appointed chief executive of Langan's, he summed up the ethos of the place: *"I aim to maintain the tradition of serving a high standard of food, with friendly service coupled with jovial debauchery!"*

Unfortunately, the jovial debauchery didn't last very long after the above lunch. In 2020, Langan's closed. Financial issues, I think was the official reason. London going down the toilet, was probably more realistic.

It re-opened one year later. 'Langan's' is still over the door. But it isn't Langan's anymore. Not as we once knew it, anyway.

It has changed beyond recognition. I don't know anyone of the old crew who goes anywhere near it anymore.

They call it progress. Not in my book...

So, that's two disaster stories. Now for the third. And the subject of this article.

### **Café Daquise.**

Heartbreakingly, in March next year (2026), Café Daquise is closing its doors for the very last time.

This will mean another legendary chunk of London's soul will slip away - and with it, countless stories, faces and voices that once gave the city its texture and its unique personality.

Just as with La Perla and Langan's - it will be yet another nail in London's coffin.

To understand why Daquise matters, you have to go back to the post-war streets of 1947. London was still in ruins. The Luftwaffe had seen to that.

The battered city was trying to recover, but rationing was firmly in place and survival was still the order of the day.

Into this grim landscape, entered a brave Polish fighter pilot named Mr Dakowski and his French wife Louise. They opened a modest little café-restaurant at 20 Thurloe Street.

They named it 'Daquise' a fusion of their two names - though it sounded like something chic from Paris...

...perhaps that was deliberate...

Anyway, from the start, it was more than a place to eat. It became a meeting ground, a community centre, a sanctuary.

For exiled Poles, it was home.

It wasn't only pilots, soldiers and officials who found their way to Thurloe Street in those first years. Writers, artists, and ordinary families - many of whom had lost everything in Poland - made Daquise their second living room.

You could hear the scratch of pens on paper as letters home were drafted at tables, smell the cigarette smoke that hung like a permanent curtain.

The fatigue of men who had worn uniforms for too long, was there to see.

Children of émigrés remember being brought here on Sundays, a place where their parents could meet old friends, argue about politics - and savour the tang of sauerkraut, the earthy comfort of barszcz, the reassuring solidity of stuffed cabbage leaves and buckwheat dumplings.

All dishes that reminded them of grandmothers they would sadly never see again.

In the post-war austerity of Britain, Daquise offered continuity. A reminder that Poland lived on, even if the map said otherwise.

That's why its walls absorbed not just conversation, but longing.

They came and sat under the dim lights, smoked furiously, sipped vodka and read Polish newspapers, spread out like lifelines to another world.

It was never glamorous, but it was *alive*.



As one journalist later described it, Daquise was "*a melancholy expat café*" a place where Poles could sit in silence, brood over their past and their losses – and watch London through steamed-up windows.

Within a few years, the little restaurant acquired a reputation as one of the cheapest and most filling places to eat in London. Students from the Lycée Français next door, came in for apple strudel and cups of tea.

Young couples found it affordable for a night out. Visiting Poles brought their families. Even tourists, tipped off by word of mouth or guidebooks, discovered it.

For all its modesty, Daquise endured - and by enduring, it became part of the city's DNA. But it wasn't just endurance that gave Daquise its character.

It was *intrigue*.

By the 1950's and early '60's, Café Daquise was no longer just a haunt for exiled Poles - it had become one of London's most intriguing backrooms.

Across the small dining room, with its L-shaped booths and utilitarian tables, conversations took place that would ripple into national headlines.

It was the time of the Cold War.

Spies brushed past one another. Letters were passed under tables. Vodka glasses clinked while information quietly changed hands. Cars outside, watched people inside - and then followed them when they left.

In fact, Daquise was so notorious, that it earned a reputation as one of London's Cold War 'spy cafés.' The KGB frequented it, so did British intelligence.

The walls, still scarred from wartime bullets, became mute witnesses to a theatre of shadows.

You can be sure that many thousands of lives were changed forever, as a direct result of decisions discussed and agreed at those tables.

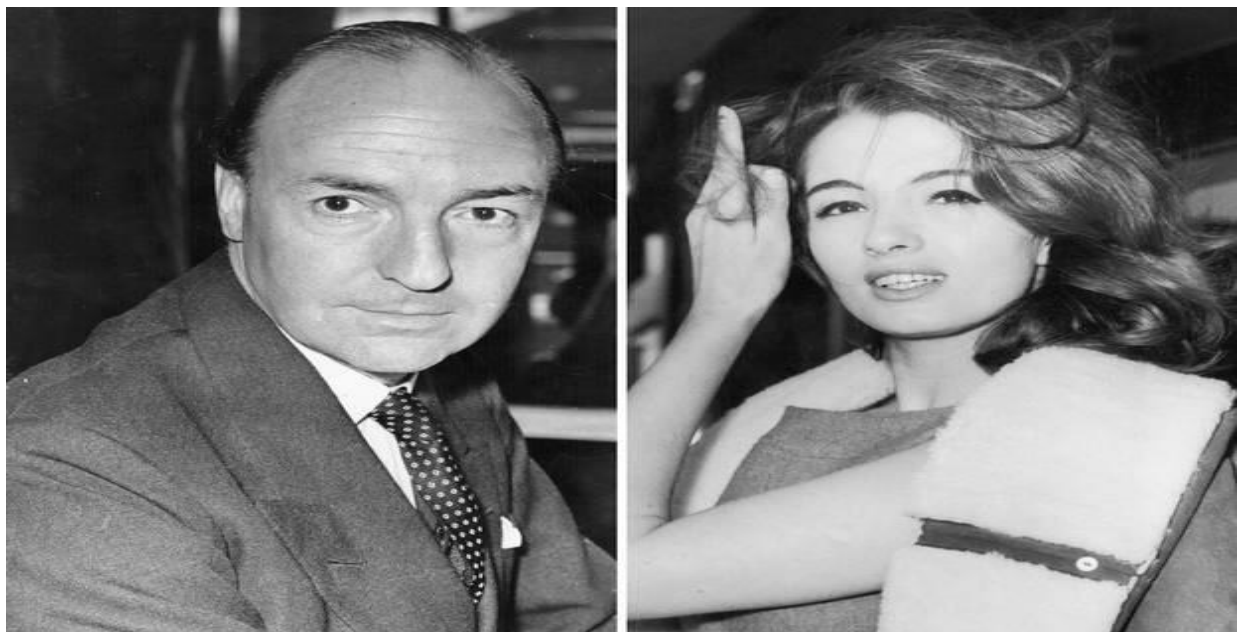
The most famous chapter came in the early 1960's, when Christine Keeler, the model at the centre of the Profumo scandal, regularly met there with Yevgeny Ivanov, the Soviet naval attaché.

Yes, this little Polish restaurant on Thurloe Street was one of the stages on which this extraordinary episode played out. History really was written between the vodka shots and the barszcz.

That scandal was seismic.

Keeler's simultaneous relationship with British War Minister John Profumo and Ivanov, turned what might have been dismissed as gossip, into a national security crisis.

In the febrile climate of the Cold War, the fact that pillow talk might cross into the Iron Curtain, was enough to topple Profumo, bring down Harold Macmillan's government - and alter the course of British politics.



Christine Keeler's meetings with Ivanov at Daquise, were not chance encounters.

They were deliberately arranged meetings, in a place that seemed both public and discreet. A cramped dining room where the hum of Polish conversations provided cover. A location close enough to Whitehall, yet obscure enough to pass unnoticed.

For Ivanov, the Russian attaché, Daquise was neutral ground. For Keeler, it was a stage where she could play her part in a drama she barely understood.

What is extraordinary, is that this small restaurant, with its bullet-scarred walls and smoky windows, formed part of the backdrop to a crisis that toppled a government and altered Britain's political course.

Many established Londoners have forgotten this, or never knew it. New Londoners have no interest. As we know, history now appears to have no relevance to them.

But Daquise was there, in the thick of it, its staff perhaps unaware that history was taking shape, in what was, in those days, booth number three.

That alone secures its place not just in culinary history, but in the wider political story of twentieth-century Britain.

It wasn't the only drama tied to the place. Roman Polanski, newly arrived in London in the mid-'60s, ate at Daquise almost daily while making *Repulsion*.

He found its atmosphere comforting, familiar, unpretentious - the closest thing to home he could find, in a city that was still alien to him.



Students of the Royal College of Art would sneak in after lectures, finding inspiration as much in the clientele, as in the food.

Polanski was perhaps the most loyal of the famous regulars, but he was far from alone.

Marianne Faithfull, sometimes with Mick, sometimes with another, Selina Scott, Claire Bloom and Rula Lenska, were just a few of the 'faces' that visited many times.

Frederick Forsyth too, was often seen at a quiet table, watching people and scribbling notes - clearly obtaining valuable research for future novels.

Edward Raczynski, Poland's wartime president-in-exile, was a regular, treating it almost as an extension of his office. Composers such as Andrzej Panufnik, émigré intellectuals and actors from the Polish theatre scene, were often seen at its tables.

Andrew Lloyd Webber was among the London celebrities who valued its unfashionable authenticity - and even Josephine Baker is said to have dropped by.

Theatre actors, émigré poets, even the occasional MP, all took their place under the dim lights. What united them was not celebrity, but comfort.

Here, they could be anonymous, just another diner with a plate of pierogi in front of them. The great and the forgotten sat side by side - and for a few hours, the playing field was level.

That, when you think about it, may have been Daquise's greatest gift of all.

The food itself though, deserved a chapter of its own. The pierogi arrived hot and generous, stuffed with potato and cheese or minced pork, then glossed with fried onions. The stuffed cabbage rolls were the ultimate comfort food - dense, filling and served in pools of tomato sauce.

Even the humble potato pancake, golden and crisp around the edges, carried more soul than entire tasting menus in the West End.

The borscht was described by one critic, as "thin, lemony, spicy and slightly sweet" but it filled the stomach and warmed the heart. Desserts were heavy with cream, poppy seeds and nostalgia.

And then there was the vodka.

Ordering one was almost a ritual. Waiters would set down small frosted glasses as if handing over something sacred. There was cherry vodka, sweet and glowing ruby red. There was honey vodka, smooth enough to soothe a sore throat.

And for the purists, there was fiery rye, a drink that burned and steadied at the same time.

Regulars raised their glasses to absent friends, to Poland, to survival. Sometimes the vodka loosened tongues enough to share secrets. Other times, it sealed lips tighter than ever.

In either case, it made Daquise more than a restaurant. It made it a confessional, a refuge and occasionally, a theatre of conspiracy.

Families came, because the portions were generous and the prices modest.

Regulars came, because, whatever else happened in their lives, Daquise remained the same.

The service was old-fashioned, sometimes brusque but never unfriendly. Waitresses seemed to have been there forever, carrying plates as if they'd carried them for a lifetime.

The tables were close enough that conversations overlapped, but Daquise was a place where you could also eat in peace.

One reviewer once captured it beautifully: "*a great place if you like to eat alone, unmolested and looking out of windows.*" That summed up its strange dual magic - it respected solitude as much as it nurtured community.

It still does, actually.

In 2005, and again in 2011, we nearly lost Daquise. The restaurant was gutted by flames. Both times, locals and loyalists feared the worst. Both times, Daquise rose again, refurbished but never ruined.

Even when developers circled, threatening to demolish Thurloe Street in the name of progress, the little café fought back. Customers signed petitions. Writers railed against its possible closure.

Angela Lambert, the novelist and journalist, called it "*a corner of Bohemia facing the bulldozer,*" and wrote with despair of losing such a place to sterile redevelopment.

The décor told the story too. On its walls hung black-and-white photographs of generals, poets, and émigrés. Those bullet scars from 1947 were left deliberately visible, a reminder of Europe's bloody century.

New managers came and went - each adding their own touches, but always preserving that unmistakable Daquise 'soul.'

The current manager - Tadeusz Dembinski - is a case in point. He is a charming man and has kept the spirit and character of Daquise very much alive. He also provided me with some great historical info for this article.

I remember first going to Daquise in the 90's. Our industry lunch group - 'The Chum's Lunch' - met a few times a year (and still does) and Daquise was one of the restaurants we always favoured.

(It now enjoys top status with us. The food is always magnificent.)

During subsequent visits, I met Zygy Lozinski, who ran Daquise in the 80's and 90's. It was a discussion about General Sosabowski whose picture was proudly hanging on the wall, that started our friendship.

My passion of all things WW2, gave me a knowledge of this great man.

Zygy was impressed that I knew of him.



Sosabowski is a Polish legend who had fought in the Polish Campaign of 1939 and also in 1944 during Operation Market Garden. He was commander of the Polish 1st Independent Parachute Brigade - and appallingly treated by the British in that failed operation.

He was superbly played in the film '*A Bridge Too Far*', by the late, great, Gene Hackman.

I mentioned to Zygy, that I would like to write an article about Daquise and its incredible history. We arranged a lunch and spent a very enjoyable few hours together. Afterwards, he very generously lent me all the press cuttings he had collected from the previous 25+ years and so much more, for my research.

Zygy was a great character. Sadly, he passed in 2019.

Daquise was - and still is - defiantly old-world. Its tables are places to linger, to argue, to reconcile, to sit in silence if you need to.

Restaurants come and go with the seasons, promising the earth and vanishing within a year.

But Daquise is different.

It has stood its ground for more than seven decades, weathering fires, recessions, waves of gentrification and endless redevelopment schemes.

Thurloe Street itself, that quirky, slightly scruffy line of shops and cafés, has long been in the crosshairs. And, as part of that, Daquise has been threatened more times than anyone can count.

But each time, people rallied, petitions circulated and Daquise survived.

Until now.

*This time, it's not going to make it...*

The news of its impending closure is both shocking and unsurprising. The pressure of modern London is relentless. Developers eye every square foot of South Kensington as potential profit.

So now, it appears this final fight has been lost. The bulldozers and the accountants have won.

For me and many of my friends, the loss feels deeply personal.

I can still remember walking through those doors, greeted not by sleek design but by warmth. The smell of dill and beetroot. The sight of tables filled with families and solitary readers alike.

And the curious mix of laughter and silence.

It wasn't perfect. It wasn't fashionable. But it had a unique heartbeat.

And it belonged to London.

I think of my own holy trinity of restaurants: La Perla, Langan's and Daquise. In addition to superb food, each offered two essential ingredients...

...atmosphere and characters.

You don't just eat in such places - you live in them for a few hours.

You become part of their story.

La Perla has sadly gone forever. The real Langan's has ceased to exist.

And now Daquise, too, will soon vanish.

It's hard not to see this as a pattern. Because what is disappearing from London isn't just restaurants.

It's character.

It's memory.

And the stubborn survival of places that refused to bend to trend.

Daquise never sanitised itself. It never tried to be glossy. It never cared about bullshit, like Michelin stars or celebrity chefs.

Instead, it offered borscht, vodka, pierogi - and the company of whoever sat down beside you. It offered the possibility of overhearing a conversation that might change history, or simply watching a lonely student find comfort in a plate of soup.

When its doors finally close, something intangible will be lost with it.

The bullet-scarred wall. The echoes of Polish officers raising a glass. The whispered exchanges of spies.

The laughter of families. The clatter of plates carried by waitresses who had seen it all before.

The very air of the place, is steeped in history. Soon, that air will disperse.

And London will be very much poorer for it.

When it has gone, we will say, Café Daquise wasn't just a restaurant. It was a witness to history and a participant in it. It fed the hungry, comforted the displaced, entertained the curious – and, at least once - helped bring down a dodgy government.

It was part of the fabric of a wonderful city that once prided itself on eccentricity, variety and surprise. But, no more. London is a pale imitation of what it once was.

Daquise's closure will be more than the end of a business. It will be yet another nail in London's coffin.

And perhaps that is the hardest truth to swallow.

London's greatness once lay in its layers - the mixture of the high and the low, the polished and the shabby, the grand theatres and the smoky cafés that clung to their corners.

Every time one of those corners disappears, the city loses not just a restaurant or a pub, but a piece of its memory. They have already destroyed Soho. Much more will follow.

Café Daquise survived war, fire and scandal, but it will not survive modern London's insatiable hunger for profit, underpinned by a complete lack of respect for history.

When I think of La Perla, of Langan's and now of Daquise, I see not only great lost restaurants, but a lost way of life.

A time when character mattered more than branding.

When conversation mattered more than Wi-Fi.

When food, even humble food, was enough.

Every single day, London is forgetting itself.

*And I feel incredibly sad about that...*



**This one's for you, old chum. Miss you loads. RIP.**

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