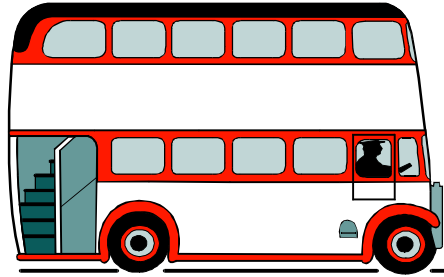


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DINING WELL IN LONDON: THE BEST TRADITIONAL AND HOTTEST NEW RESTAURANTS

By Richard Turen



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"I used to think that the English cook the way they do because, through sheer technical deficiency, they had not been able to master the art of cooking. I have discovered, to my stupefaction, that the English cook that way because that is the way they like it"

- Waverley Root

As, perhaps, the most willingly assimilationist city in Europe, London has, until very recently, been known for the quality of Indian and Chinese restaurants within its midst. One could always go to Simpson's on the Strand for a cut off the roast beef cart, but other than that expensive experience; the notion of finding English food in London seemed like an impossible nightmare, rather than dream.

That has changed. And it has changed in time for the strongest tourist season in London ever, a record breaking-wave of visitors from these and closer shores. For those familiar with the dining scene in London even a mere ten years ago, the changes will be startling. Young chefs are leaving Paris to work in Chelsea. Movie stars and business moguls are getting into the act and a whole collection of London eateries are now virtually impossible to visit on a Friday or Saturday evening unless you know someone. Someone important. Travel agents report that Americans are booking the highest-priced hotels in hopes that the concierge will be able to secure normally unavailable reservations for dinner.

The birth of the EEC has created a stew of interest in things culinary and current. The British have discovered their heritage, a seafaring heritage that offers access to world-class fishmongers capable of far more than cockles and mussels. The cattle from Italy and Switzerland, the pork from Germany and Austria, Salmon from Scotland, are all readily available. Everywhere there is a concern for quality and prices are shooting up. There is an inverse proportion to the price of a restaurant and the difficulty involved in securing a reservation.

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What this all means is that it is now possible to dine significantly better in London than one might in most of the major cities of the U.S. If you are going to be visiting London this year, I want to be certain that you are properly armed with a listing of the very best restaurants in a number of price ranges. Some of these are well known. But others are still largely undiscovered by tourist hordes. Whenever one went to London there was always the big “But”, as in, “it was absolutely wonderful but the food”.

But all that has changed. London is now a destination for all seasons, a rich tapestry of far-flung cultures slowly being intertwined with the best of European influences. Yet, happily, thus far the tapestry has a decided British flair and style. You are going to love dining in London if you avoid the numerous pitfalls that still linger in the background. Here are the restaurants that I recommend to friends who want to dine well in London:

La Tante Claire – 68 Royal Hospital Road (Quiet area of Chelsea)

This is, I believe the best dining experience in London, largely because of the supreme talents of Chef Pierre Koffman. This small dining room in a nondescript building offers truly memorable cuisine, dinners that people talk about for the rest of their lives. Don't be put off by the fact that the chef's specialty is a pig's foot that is stuffed with sweetbreads and morels on top of a dense gravy accompanied by butter-laden mashed potatoes.



Summary: cozy and fabulous food – this is the spot.

The Criterion – 224 Piccadilly (Right in the heart of Piccadilly Circus)

A huge hall that has been serving food since the 1850's, the Criterion is an architectural delight made more magnificent by the cooking of Chef Marco Pierre White. The largely French staff is efficient, delivering platters of 1990's brasserie food to the always-packed tables. Expect dishes such as Confit of duck Lyonnaise with Morteau sausage and mushroom sauce or gredine of veal in a green peppercorn crust.

Summary: More an experience than a fine dining experience. Don't be surprised to see the “Stones” at the next table.

Rules – 35 Maiden lane (Covent Garden tube stop)

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I will be slammed for including this spot – it does attract a fair number of tourists and is quite expensive. But it also is London's most beautiful restaurant and has been serving food since 1798, which is a bit of a recommendation. I love it because you can get the traditional British dishes here such as venison and fresh Dover Sole. For dessert there is fine Stilton cheese with crackers.

Summary: Do whatever you have to do to get in once. This is a required tradition.

The Ivy – 1 West Street (Covent Garden tube stop)

A quite stylish restaurant with truly excellent renditions of Euro-contemporary food, much of it based on British traditions. So, yes, there is sausage and mash and sticky toffee pudding. But there is also squid-ink chicken. Don't be surprised to see telly stars to your left and London tabloid editors on your right.

Summary: Tres hot at the moment, combining excellent food and heavy-hitter customers without the heavy-handed snobbery.

“Even today, well brought-up English girls are taught by their mothers to boil allveggies for at least a month and a half, just in case one of the dinner gueststurns up without his teeth.”

- Calvin Trillin

The Savoy Hotel– The Strand (Aldwych tube stop)

You may want to enjoy the ultimate power lunch at the Savoy Grill, where those in the know order the omelet Arnold Bennett, made with smoked fish and soft cheese. But be forewarned. You will be seated in the center of the room with all the other “nobodies”. The really important people look down from their perch on the teal-upholstered baguettes that line the walls.

Actually I recommend the Savoy primarily for its afternoon tea service. The uniformed attendants sparkle and they do refill the cake stand – a gesture I find can be quite rewarding.

By the way, here's how an English tea works. You will first get a selection of sandwiches with the crust removed, perhaps egg salad, cucumbers, or tiny shrimp. This will be followed by scones served with genuine clotted cream and true strawberry preserves. This is followed by a selection of cakes with formal tea service.

Summary: Do the Savoy, or the equally impressive Ritz Hotel, for tea at least once. It's an expensive but endearing tradition.

Aubergine – 11 Park Walk (Sloan Square Tube stop) 0171-352-3449

An important haunt for true foodies who will be quickly enchanted with Scottish Chef Gordon Ramsey and his menu of French and English fusion entrees. Those in the know suggest the sea bass in a memorable vanilla sauce.

Summary: A rather comfy gastronomic palace that couldn't be “hotter” at the moment.

Deal's Restaurant and Diner – Harbour Yard (Chelsea Harbour – take bus C3) 071-352-5887

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This is a hamburger joint with British elan. Princess Margaret's son owns it. The Queen Mother once hopped off a barge to grab a hamburger at Deal's, solidifying its fame. If you're traveling with kids, this is a great place to visit and the children's menu is reasonable. A good choice for those who miss American-style burgers and spareribs.

Summary: Comfort food for the whole family, with a slight Anglo twist.

Ken Lo's Memories of China – 67-69 Ebury St. (Victoria Station tube stop) 071-730-7734.

Food critics generally regard this as London's best Chinese restaurant. Mr. Lo has written numerous cookbooks and hosted a popular cooking show on the BBC. His grandfather was the Ambassador to the Court of St. James. The décor, lots of white with mahogany tables is soothing and elegant. The food may be described in much the same way. A dinner here will make it difficult for you to ever feel comfortable again with your local Chinese take-out menu. Numerous Churchill & Turen clients have extolled the virtues of this restaurant.

Summary: No one who has ever eaten Chinese take-out should be permitted to leave London without dining here at least once.

Bistro 190 – 190 Queens Gate (Gloucester Road tube stop) 0171-581-5666

They don't take reservations so you may encounter a bit of a wait. This place has made its name on large portions of stick-to-the-ribs Gaelic food, albeit with some British overtones. So you might see liver served with a mushroom terrine or a variety of grilled fish. In fact, there is another restaurant called "Downstairs at 190" that has much the same feel to it. This one specializes in seafood. Since my last visit, tourists had not yet discovered it.

Summary: A nice find in an interesting neighborhood.

Wodka – 12 St. Albans Grove (Kensington High tube stop) 0171-937-6513

Still, tres chic, and a different kind of place that I highly recommend. This is essentially contemporary Polish cuisine without apologies. It is served in an elegant setting on a side street to a crowd that seems to come from the fashion world. The blinis are wonderful; particularly the ones made with caviar or herring. The signature dish is roast duck cooked with figs in a port sauce. Excellent. Expect to spend a fair bit on the wide variety of flavored vodkas.

Summary: Be prepared to tell you friends that you may have dined in the



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best Polish restaurant in the world.

Scott's – 20 Mount Street – 0171-629-5248

Despite numerous new competitors, Lawrence Isaacson's very moderrrrrn establishment is probably London's best seafood restaurant. The fashion crowd and a horde of wanna-be's in leather, line-up for dishes like the red mullet and scallop soup and absolutely mystical crab salad created with an herbed mayonnaise. Don't even imagine that the fish served here isn't the freshest available. And you will pay for the privilege of enjoying it for either lunch or dinner. There is a very popular oyster bar downstairs.

Summary: Of all of the culinary arts, the one that the Brits have always handled rather well is the cooking of fresh fish. Scott's is a prime example.

Pied a Terre – 34 Charlotte Street (just off Oxford street near the shops) – 171-636-1178

This small, lovely restaurant has minimalist décor enhanced by an outstanding art collection. But the real art is served on plates; rather generous portions of fine French cuisine presented by a former assistant to Paris' famed Joel Robouchon. Look for braised meats and truly memorable sauces and the chef's now legendary multi-preparation plates, The duck dish, for instance, may come with roasted leg and breast, confit pate, as well as hot foie gras.

Summary: A wonderful small room presenting truly memorable interpretations of French classics. This one's for serious foodies.

Le Pont de la Tour – 36d Shad Thames (Cabbies all know it – it's in the Butler's Wharf area) – 171-403-8403

Owned by the current guru of fine dining in England, Sir Terrance Conran, Le Pont de la Tour is one of the current top places to dine in England. It's a riverside restaurant, and you can overlook the Thames and the Tower Bridge at night while dining on a saddle of rabbit, perfectly cooked grilled salmon in herb sauce, or Dover Sole. Chef David Burke is one of my favorites, a beacon of light in the London culinary sky. His food is easy to deal with; always recognizable, yet so well prepared that you will become a fan for life.

Summary: Given the setting, and the lack of pretentiousness, this has to be my first choice in London dining – at the moment.

Zafferano/90 – 15 Lowndes St. – 171-235-5800

This is top-notch Italian cuisine prepared in a lovely, fifty+ seat restaurant that has the feel of a small village restaurant in Tuscany. The specialty is creative northern Italian cooking using exquisite home-made pastas filled with lobster or pumpkin, beautifully served fish, and sliced beef served in a terrific balsamic reduction sauce.

Summary: If true Italian is an atmospheric setting is your goal, it will be nicely fulfilled at Zafferano.

Gay Hussar – 2 Greek St. (On Soho side street – Leicester Square tube stop) – 171-437-0973

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I don't know how many years it's been since I started going to this small, lovely Hungarian restaurant. It's always been one of my favorites. Don't miss the stuffed cabbage, the veal goulash with paprika, or the lemon-cheese pancakes for dessert.

It is located on a side street behind Shaftsbury Avenue in the heart of the theater district.

Summary: Old-world charm and sometimes rich, carefully served Hungarian cuisine. Home to Labour Party politicians, among others.

London used to be a culinary desert. It is now home to some of the brightest stars in the European culinary universe.

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