

Plenty on your plate

London's restaurant scene has finally come of age, offering the discerning diner a plethora of exciting and affordable options from market stalls to haute cuisine

Story **Christine Manfield**

There's a buzz on the streets of London, spirits are lifted. Sure, some business sectors are still feeling the post-GFC pinch and retrenchment and corporate downsizing have made their mark but it's hard to pick when London's restaurants, cafes and bars are constantly packed. Optimistically, the brave are forging ahead. There's a rash of new restaurants, bars and hotels opening, an upswing in luxury. London, it seems, is preparing itself for the Olympics next year. The atmosphere is buzzy and busy, which isn't too surprising for a city with a large population and an influx of some two million visitors a month.

The language on these streets is multi-lingual. There's a mix of people from all races and all classes that exudes a healthy tension; it determines London's dynamic character. The city has wealth, poverty, aspiration, displacement and integration in equal measure. Its streets have always been a showcase of the latest fashions, body art and hairstyles. London screams cosmopolitan and variety. It's the cultural hub of the world and there's always something to see, an enriching experience to be had.

My favourite time is twilight. The advantage of being relatively close to the North Pole gives London extended gentle light during summer and the most bewitching and enchanting skies. And everything comes alive after the bleakness of a cold winter. Suddenly, rooftop terraces and bars have become de rigueur, even if they are only used for five months of the year. Summer brings the city to life. The days are long and daylight hours extend well into the evening, making outdoor spaces highly sought after in good weather.

Spring and autumn are equally lovely. My favourite time to walk through the parks or along the river past the striking architecture of Westminster Abbey and the Houses of Parliament, which take pride of place on the northern bank of the Thames. Flowers – daffodils, tulips, roses, depending on the season – are in full bloom, adding perfume and a riot of colour across the city's parks and gardens. Winter doesn't deter people from the great outdoors, the streets are packed to the rafters right up to Christmas, despite snow, wind and a lack of sunshine. Winter skies are white and

dramatic, very different to what we are used to in Australia.

The East End, from the Liverpool Street hub to Hoxton, Farringdon, Clerkenwell, Hackney, Shoreditch, Whitechapel, Spitalfields and Bethnal Green is morphing from its former grittiness into a dynamic inner-city hub. Once home to derelict warehouses, previously grand Georgian houses and run-down tenements teeming with down-trodden Cockneys and immigrants, last-century's slums have become or are becoming gentrified. Renovations and designer makeovers have given this part of the city an enormous face-lift. [See Robert Bevan's New East Enders story on page 46.] There's a palpable vitality. Restaurants, cocktail bars and lounges, cafes, art galleries, clubs and the recent arrival of some boutique hotel properties are giving the West End a good run for its money. The Shoreditch Rooms has a rooftop pool; other sought-after hotels include The Hoxton, The Zetter, the Town Hall Hotel and Apartments

The East End is where the cool dudes of the art and design world are hanging out and making an impact on the city's bohemian culture. Don't miss the Columbia Road flower market on Sunday mornings – it's a rite of passage to anyone calling themselves a Londoner, a step back into Dickensian times with street vendors yelling their prices and competing madly with their neighbours. Expect a sardine-type squash with the crowds; stop for cup of tea or a cupcake from Treacle, then a pint at the local pub, with the bar often filled with those coming home from their Saturday-night partying.

A little farther on, past Regent's Canal is Broadway Market near London Fields, open Saturdays and home to one of the city's original jellied eel shops, F Cooke, purveyor of these fishy delicacies as well as pie and mash since 1900. Broadway is a fresh produce market that caters to the locals and is gaining a considerable reputation. There's a mix of Indian, Sri Lankan, Italian and Vietnamese food vendors – fantastic.

Across town, the West End has always been a traveller's mecca and there is unlimited choice of places to stay. Some of my favourites are Mayfair's Maddox Street Hotel, The Haymarket and The Trafalgar (with its fabulous Vista rooftop bar and expansive views) and the brand new St John Hotel in Covent Garden. Dean Street Townhouse in the heart of Soho is another glamorous newcomer, although rather noisy on a busy night with the bar going off



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at full volume on the ground floor. Warning: take earplugs if you are eating there, the dining room is in the bar area.

Regent Street is lined with impressive Victorian and Edwardian era buildings and there is nothing more grand than walking its curved length from Piccadilly to Oxford Circus late at night when the crowds have vacated. The West End is a consumer paradise and it's very easy to burn through the pounds. The extravagance of the dressed windows is like porn for shoppers. It's there to entice, to get you inside. The famous food halls of Harrod's and Fortnum & Mason's are legendary for their enviable supply of the world's bounty. They, with the more recent addition of Harvey Nichols, are British institutions. It seems only appropriate to purchase a small pot of Gentleman's Relish from the food hall at Fortnum & Mason's on Piccadilly – a rich anchovy paste that is brilliant on a sandwich or with roast meats – to take home as an edible memory.

Take the Tube from inner-east Bethnal Green to Chelsea and you may as well be in a different city – I love the extremes on offer, there is always a place to fit, to feel

at home and comfortable. There is enormous choice, for everyone. The districts are distinctive in their character whether it's Soho, Covent Garden, Mayfair, Notting Hill, South Kensington, Knightsbridge, Chelsea, Belgravia, Clerkenwell, Brixton, Vauxhall, Hoxton or Shoreditch.

London's restaurant scene has finally come of age: the options for decent eating have multiplied beyond belief and the discerning diner can choose from a huge number of exciting and affordable options. We all know London can do the expensive, the stylish and the luxurious but now it delivers on the casual and affordable without losing any of its style or aplomb. No longer are you limited to French haute cuisine as the only temple of gastronomy. Many of the city's bistros and gastropubs offer menus that proudly reflect their British heritage; French bistro food remains as strong as ever (Racine, Terroirs, Les Deux Salons, Arbutus); the Italians have always been hot favourites; and the representation of decent, authentic and regional Chinese and Asian food has finally staked itself in the heart of London. There's also a shift from corporate-

owned, flashy "make-a-statement" places of the '90s and noughties, to owner-operated, smaller and funky places. Wine lists across town offer a huge selection from Europe and around the world and it's great to be reacquainted with some old favourites and make new discoveries, some esoteric ones that don't make it to our shores.

Just as the restaurant culture has matured and developed into one of the most dynamic cities anywhere in the world, home cooking is having a makeover. Product awareness, sustainable, organic and fair trade are at the forefront and gaining in popularity, and farmers markets are flourishing – the historic Borough Market at Southwark near London Bridge remains the best example (open Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays) of premium local and regional produce. It's a showcase of food wholesalers and retailers with wine shops, farmhouse cheeses, organic produce, seafood, bread and charcuterie. The small market in the carpark behind Waitrose supermarket off Marylebone High Street operates on Sundays and the Spitalfields market on Commercial



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01 Since its renaissance just over a decade ago, Borough Market has become a haven for anybody who cares about the quality and provenance of the food they eat.

02 The market provides an abundance of excellent British and international produce.

03 London's diverse population is reflected in the vast variety of cuisines on offer, from Afghan to Argentinian, Spanish tapas to Thai.

Road is open Wednesdays for organic produce. Make a mandatory stop at St John Bread + Wine for canteen-style, reliable traditional British fare and great breads to take away. Brewer Street market in Soho on Saturdays has a van that sells raw organic milk throughout the year.

The strong dollar makes it an ideal time to travel, visiting London hasn't been this easy on the pocket in ages. It would be sinful to miss this opportunity. Another reason? London black cabs are the best taxis in the world. Drivers always know the intricacies of the narrow, winding streets; the shortest possible route, ducking down backstreets to avoid heavy traffic. They know their stuff. Sure, it costs a few quid more than the Tube or the bus but it is the best way to get around the city in a hurry. You usually get a few good stories along the way too, a great introduction to the heartbeat of the city.

These days, London is worthy of a visit just to eat. And if you manage to eat your way through the list that follows, then you will have experienced some of the best this dynamic and diverse city has to offer.

My London guide

Restaurants

Viajante

Town Hall Hotel, Patriot Square
(off Cambridge Heath Rd), Bethnal Green
Phone 020 7871 0461

The creative genius of chef Nuno Mendes' menu. Choose between a six or nine-course tasting menu; matching wines optional but the best way to go. Menus are not printed, the delivery is verbal and the flavours and textures explode on the palate. Perhaps the most exciting contemporary dining in London.

River Cafe

Thames Wharf, Hammersmith
Phone 020 7386 4200

Every London visit is defined by lunch here. Food is simple and exquisite; the place reeks of heart, soul and passion for all things good in life. Brilliant staff.

Greenhouse

27a Hays Mews, Mayfair
Phone 020 7499 3331

Refined and elegant contemporary French cooking in a beautiful room. Quiet location; enter through the walled garden. Flavours are subdued and precise.

Ba Shan

24 Romilly St, Soho
Phone 020 7287 3266

Sister to Bar Shu (across the street) and Chinatown's Baozi Inn. Brilliant authentic, regional Hunanese food, a celebration of flavour (no pandering to timid palates) where the heat factor rivals that of Sichuan. Do try the fish-flavoured eggplant and minced pork.

Helene Darroze at The Connaught

Carlos Place, Mayfair
Phone 020 3147 7200

Grand dining, with all the pomp and ceremony you expect of a French Michelin-starred chef and a hotel of this ilk. The set-price lunch buys you pampering with style. Worth a visit for the cheese trolley alone.

The Ledbury

127 Ledbury Rd, Notting Hill
Phone 020 7792 9090

Brett Graham's menu is contemporary French; his food is clever and exquisite. I love this room during the day time, so go for a long leisurely lunch.

Boundary Restaurant

The Boundary, 2-4 Boundary St, Shoreditch
Phone 020 7729 1051

The newcomer in the Terence Conran stable. Modern British bistro cooking, done with flair and expertise.

Yauatcha

15 Broadwick St, Soho
Phone 020 7494 8888

The best place for Chinese dim sum (yum cha) in London and the menu is available lunch and dinner. There is also an excellent tea menu.

Club Gascon

57 West Smithfield, Farringdon
Phone 020 7796 0600

Next door to Smithfield Meat Market. I have long been a fan of chef Pascal Aussignac's seasonal French menu and his extravagant foie gras offerings. The new Cellar Gascon in the annexe is ideal for lunch with tapas plates and French wines by the glass.



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Casual and spontaneous

London has seen a revolutionary revival of casual, small spaces that offer excellent value, terrific food and an affordable, fun and spontaneous way to enjoy the city.

Terroirs

5 King William IV St, Charing Cross
(near St Martin-in-the-Fields)
Phone 020 7036 0660

I loved this place because it's dynamic, fun, intriguing and intelligent. A fabulous selection of wines by the glass; knowledgeable and engaging service. Serious about its wine, with a detailed list and comprehensive wine notes, showcasing the natural wines of France and Italy from artisan makers. Refreshingly honest food – think rustic Mediterranean flavours – a salad of Puy lentils, roasted beetroot and chevre or duck rillettes, saucisson, snails with bacon, garlic and parsley on toast. The plats du jour leave you wanting for nothing. This place is buzzy, friendly (sit at the bar and watch the action), unpretentious and fun – exactly what eating and drinking out ought to be. They have opened a second branch Brawn, on Columbia Road in the East End.

Barrafina

54 Frith St, Soho
Phone 020 7813 8016

A cool tapas bar that makes you feel like you have been transported to Spain. Modern clean lines, a terrific choice of wines and small plates.



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- 01 Hot spot: Ba Shan serves regional Hunanese food; the heat factor rivals that of Sichuan.
- 02 Swedish crispbreads, rye bread with pickled herrings, cinnamon buns – eat in or take out from the Nordic Bakery.
- 03 Touch of Australia: The Lantana cafe, opened by a Brisbane native, has great coffee and breakfasts

Sotheby's Cafe

34-35 New Bond St, Mayfair
Phone 020 7293 5077

A little oasis in which to enjoy lunch after a spot of Mayfair shopping, referred to by in-the-know locals who recommend the lobster club sandwich or potted duck livers with red onion marmalade and walnut toast.

Dehesa

25 Ganton St, Soho (off Carnaby St)
Phone 020 7494 4170

Spanish and Italian tapas and wine bar, buzzy and sophisticated atmosphere. Lots of fun; great flavours.

Lantana

13 Charlotte Place, Fitzrovia
Phone 020 7637 3347

A Brisbane native opened this cafe nearly two years. One of the very few places for a decent espresso in London; great breakfast menu; divine pastries.

Modern Pantry

47 St Johns Square (off Clerkenwell Rd), Clerkenwell
Phone 020 7250 0833

Anna Hansen turns out artisan breads, pastries, salads and pizza baked in the open kitchen. There's a long communal table for those who prefer to eat in. Open breakfast, lunch and dinner with menus that seduce. My sugar-cured prawn omelette (free range organic eggs naturally) with smoked chilli sambal for breakfast was sensational.

Dishoom

12 Upper St Martins Lane, Covent Garden
Phone 020 7420 9320

A retro Bombay cafe, a little piece of heritage Indian style and flavour in London. A spicy roomali roll and glass of chai make a quick, perfect lunch.

- 01** At La Fromagerie, one of the best cheese shops in England, sample a tasting plate before you buy.
- 02** Prune and brandy sausages, Porterhouse, perhaps some haggis? It's all there at first-class butcher, Ginger Pig

Princi

135 Wardour St, Soho
Phone 020 7478 8888

Italian baker Rocco Princi joins forces with Alan Yau. Food is displayed on the long bar counter – bakery/cafe cakes, pastries, tarts, sandwiches, salads, antipasti.

Moro

34 Exmouth Market, Clerkenwell
Phone 020 7833 8336

Now a London institution. Flavoursome Spanish/Moorish food in a room that's busy and boisterous.

Nordic Bakery

14a Golden Square (off Upper James St), Soho
Phone 020 3230 1077

Decent espresso, Scandinavian rye breads and pastries, smoked salmon or gravalax on rye. Coffee served in Aalto glassware; Nordic design detail.

Kopapa

32 Monmouth St, Seven Dials, Covent Garden
Phone 020 7240 6076

Peter Gordon's latest venture offers small plates – flavour spectrum is broad – similar in style to his Providore and Tapa Room in Marylebone High St (still one of the best breakfast/brunch menus in town).



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Food shops

The city boasts a veritable cornucopia. You'll find African and Caribbean, Spanish and Portuguese, Chinese and Asian, Japanese, Middle Eastern, Arabic and Jewish, European, Polish, Russian ... everything.

For cheese, go to Neal's Yard Dairies (Covent Garden and Borough markets) or La Fromagerie (Moxton St, off Marylebone High St).

Best seafood: Fishworks (89 Marylebone High St), Steve Hatt (90 Essex Rd, Islington), Pescheria Mattiucci (8 Blenheim Crescent, Notting Hill) or Golborne Fisheries (77 Golborne Rd, Ladbroke Grove).

Best butcher is Ginger Pig (next to La Fromagerie).

Ottolenghi is my **preferred traiteur and patisserie**,



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very sophisticated, delicious flavours. They have shops in Notting Hill, Islington, Kensington and Belgravia.

There's huge choice for **handmade chocolates** but my favourites are La Maison du Chocolat (Piccadilly), Leonidas (Harrods) and Cocomaya (Mayfair).

Favourite bars

Le Bar – L'Atelier de Joel Robuchon

13–15 West St, Covent Garden
(off Cambridge Circus)

Take the lift to the second floor to this cosy cocktail bar. In summer, the outdoor terrace is the place to be.

Shochu Lounge

37 Charlotte St, Fitzrovia

Basement bar of Roka (Japanese robata grill). Very hip; fab cocktails based on Japanese shochu spirit. 