

## In praise of regional British restaurant guides

12 Mar 2004 by JR

National guides to restaurants can easily be a year out of date, expensive and therefore frustrating. And, as the current revelations of a former Michelin inspector in France reveal, not quite as comprehensive as they claim.

Fortunately, however, we can now benefit from a series of alternative regional guides, each of which cover their specific area and which, together with what is offered via the internet from individual restaurants' websites, add up to a far more comprehensive picture of what is going on in British restaurants than has ever been available before.

The final piece of Britain's restaurant jigsaw was suitably completed on March 1st with the publication of *Dining Out in Wales* (£6.95) published under the auspices of the Welsh Tourist Board.

The key to this pocket book's value and its integrity lies as much in the appointment of its editor, Colin Pressdee, whom I first met when he was cooking in his own restaurant in Swansea in the 1970's, as in the information it conveys. Over the past twenty five years Pressdee has taken on a seemingly messianical role to bring the best of Welsh produce and cooking to the notice of anyone who will listen and this book sensitively combines the details of his acquired knowledge with a clear layout of the restaurants which demonstrate culinary best practice.

There are brief descriptions of sewin, welsh sea trout; laverbread similar to the more revered Nori of Japan; a growing number of cheeses, whose names such as Gorwydd and Nant y Bwla will not be found elsewhere in the world and the brand new Welsh Whisky Company, the first distillery to operate in Wales for a century.

Amongst my favourite restaurants over the succeeding pages are the Penhelig Arms in Aberdovey; Cardiff's La Marina, restaurateur Benigo Martinez's latest outpost, and Le Gallois; Tyddyn Llan in Llandrillo, Denbighshire where Bryan Webb, once of Hilaire in Knightsbridge, is now ensconced and Ye Olde Bulls Head in Beaumauris where our family first ate in 1960 several decades after its more illustrious visitors and far more skillful writers, Charles Dickens and Dr Johnson.

This country guide is, however, only a step up from the regional guides which have been so influential in reviving the fortunes of the British countryside since the outbreak of foot and mouth. Amongst the best are *A Taste of Lincolnshire* ([www.visitlincolnshire.com](http://www.visitlincolnshire.com)); *A Taste of Staffordshire* ([www.staffordshire.gov.uk/tasteofstaffordshire](http://www.staffordshire.gov.uk/tasteofstaffordshire)); *Flavours of Herefordshire* ([www.visitherefordshire.co.uk](http://www.visitherefordshire.co.uk)) and The Taste District section of [www.golakes.co.uk](http://www.golakes.co.uk). There is also *The 2003/4 Trencherman's Guide to the country pubs and restaurants of the south west of England* published by South West Tourism ([www.visitsouthwest.co.uk](http://www.visitsouthwest.co.uk)) although in my opinion a redesign of this guide is now overdue.

Scottish restaurateurs have always suffered in my opinion from the absence of the equivalent of John and Sally McKenna who did so much to bring Irish restaurateurs and producers to their well deserved prominence. But The List ([www.list.co.uk](http://www.list.co.uk)) provides via its weekly bulletins put together by 25 freelance and obviously enthusiastic journalists a comprehensive picture of where and what to eat in these two buzzing cities.

Other busy metropolises boast their own guides: *City Life* for Manchester; *The Venue* for Bristol and *The Juicy Guide* and *The Good Guide* for Brighton. There are also *Time Out Guide* to London, Edinburgh, Dublin and Glasgow although the London guide still comes in an unwieldy A4 format. With the *Zagat London Guide* stuck seemingly in a black hole, the most trustworthy London guides remain Charles Campion's *Rough Guide* (£8.99) and Richard and Peter Harden's *London Guide* (£9.99) together with their recently published *Party Guide* (£9.99.) for those who want to entertain in more idiosyncratic surroundings such as a dinner party in Wellington Arch built in 1826 and overlooking Hyde Park Corner.

The emergence of these guides is timely particularly for those in the country whose business really begin to prosper with the arrival of Easter but they also coincide with two other important developments.

The first is the re- issue of *Traditional Foods of Britain* by Laura Mason and Catherine Brown (Prospect Books 19.50) which describes over 400 foodstuffs that have been traditionally produced for more than three generations at least. Many of these - Welsh ham, Lincoln red cattle and the precise origin of treacle tart (as well as when Golden Syrup was added to the recipe!) are now happily intrinsic to so many restaurant menus that we no longer need to fear for their disappearance - a far cry from the situation twenty years ago.

The second was the visit to London last week of Ferran Adria, currently, if such a title existed, the world's No 1 chef. Adria was not here to promote himself, his restaurant or his cookbooks (recently published in English) but Spain and at the instigation of the Spanish Government who have cleverly tied their country's culinary reputation to Adria's rising star.

I know from a lunch with a representative from Visit Britain ([www.visitbritain.com](http://www.visitbritain.com)), the organisation responsible for looking after those who visit this country, that their representatives have the appetite for good food. We now I believe, and this opinion is confirmed by the plethora of these regional restaurant guides, have the chefs and restaurateurs to promote alongside those of any other.

Finally, some short term advice. Many restaurateurs on both sides of the Atlantic report that their business is now booming, perhaps because the period between January and Easter does not see many new openings, but more probably because menu prices have not risen for some time but demand certainly has. City and prestigious West End restaurants are now very busy at lunchtime and Zuma, the exciting Japanese restaurant in Knightsbridge, had a waiting list of over 100 one night last week.

If you want to be sure of a table at a particular table do book well in advance and try to be reasonably flexible with the timing.