

## Nicholas Lander on three new London restaurants to avoid

16 Jul 2001 by JR

**High Holborn**, an expensive restaurant which earned a Michelin star despite only opening last August, has just closed. Its owners blame higher than budgeted costs and a later than anticipated opening date but the real reasons, as I know from two disappointing meals there, were more basic - the food was too convoluted and the prices too high. Quite simply, the owners had not bothered to research what their potential customers in this busy, competitive part of central London would want and pay for.

This at the moment seems to be an increasingly common phenomenon amongst chefs and restaurateurs in London. Sadly, I have never been, in such a short space of time, to such a succession of restaurants that seem to have been opened for all the wrong reasons.

Ego, fashion and novelty seem glaringly obvious, but the fundamental requirement - to give customers a good time at a fair price and to make them want to come back - is woefully absent in all of the following. As a result, I feel that my role for once is not to steer readers in their direction but to mention them to save you money and disappointment and to direct you to other better- value places.

Ego is unquestionably the driving force behind the return of Richard Neat to London. The motive is apparent not just from the naming of this new complex on the second floor of the Oxo Tower, London SE1, **Neat Restaurant and Brasserie**, but from the size of the owner's name on the menus and the equally conspicuous display of his name at eye level in lettering on the glass walls that divide the brasserie from the restaurant.

Neat is technically a highly competent chef, an undisputed fact evident from the Michelin stars he won at the 40- seater Pied à Terre in Fitzrovia in the early 1990s and his other restaurant in Cannes. But in coming back to London with menus that are overly masculine, out of step with the seasons and ridiculously expensive, Neat has failed to recognise what has changed since he left London in 1996 and that is that most people today choose to eat out to be amused rather than dine out to be impressed.

Dinner for four in Neat's restaurant, which ultimately cost £320 with two inexpensive bottles of wine and no after dinner drinks, got off to a bad start. I could not see my guest. Quite obviously, no member of Neat's staff had sat at our table and realised that the combination of a tall vase and an even taller flower completely blocked the view across the table.

That problem was easily solved by moving the vase to the floor but finding something on the menu to match the setting or the temperature was far more difficult. The restaurant's riverside position with views of St. Paul's in the evening sunlight should be complemented by equally uplifting dishes but none are on offer. Instead Neat offers overworked towers: skate wing and cucumber *velouté*; an extraordinarily messy combination of scallops, black pudding, scrambled egg and apple; lamb cutlets - at their most tender at this time of year - weighed down by a *ballotine* of offal and veal sweetbreads rendered over- salty by an unnecessary wrapping of Parma ham. In the worst tradition of modern French cooking, vegetables and salads are disdained and desserts are simply too rich even without the pre- dessert *crème brûlée*.

Although the brasserie is less expensive, it is no great deal. A small example of Neat's extortionate pricing is the dessert trolley which holds six different tarts, a slice of which costs a staggering £7.50 and was not memorable. No icecreams or sorbets which might excite - this regrettably is a menu to suit the kitchen rather than the customer. Along the burgeoning South Bank head instead for **Oxo Brasserie** (+44 (0)20 7803 3888) where the views are better; **RSJ** (+44 (0)20 7928 4554), where the wine list is much better; **Bankside** (+44 (0)20 7633 0011) or the cluster of inexpensive restaurants on Gabriel's Wharf just by Oxo tower.

**Masala Zone**, in London's Soho, is the brainchild of experienced restaurateurs, Namita Panjabi (Chutney Mary) and Ranjit Mathrani (Veeraswamy), who have recognised the West's current fascination with the street food of Asia and decided to save us the travel cost. But in doing so they have left street food's excitement and distinctive charms thousands of miles behind.

The joy of street food in India, Thailand or Vietnam is that you pick your stall, sit or stand opposite the chef/ proprietor and are cooked for individually. At Masala Zone these attractions are dispensed with. There is a menu. A great deal of what I ordered had been pre- cooked so it could be served quickly but had as a result lost its freshness and flavour and, most unsympathetically, no plates are provided so it is impossible to taste anyone else's food without unhygienically dipping into their bowls (the manager tried to argue that this is on grounds of authenticity but my suspicion is that it is cost related). Try **Soho Spice** nearby at 124 Wardour Street, London W1 (+44 (0)20 7434 0808).

The most ridiculous of the lot is **Blue Belt**, an attempt by two Frenchmen to do for French food what Moshi Moshi Sushi and Yo! Sushi have done for Japanese. Two floors in Old Street, London EC1, have been tastefully and expensively converted to incorporate two conveyor belts on to which a couple of young, rather disconsolate- looking French chefs load and unload small plates and bowls of food such as *carpaccio* of duck, roasted quail in a cherry sauce, seabass in red wine sauce, tiramisu and dark chocolate mousse.

It is not just that the quality of the food is deplorable - the cold food is too cold having just come out of the refrigerator whilst the hot dishes overheat and lose their flavour from sitting overlong on small burners - but that the whole concept is ridiculous. What works for cold fish and rice just does not work for ingredients that derive their flavour from being cooked whole and for sauces that quickly coagulate. Avoid Blue Belt at all costs and head instead for **Gaudi** (+44 (0)20 7250 1057), or **Smith's** (+44 (0)20 7236 6666), **St John** (+44 (0)20 7251 0848) or **Club Gascon** (+44 (0)20 7796 0660) all in nearby Smithfield.