

A week in London's restaurants

24 Nov 2004 by JR

A week touring the West End and the west of London left me in no doubt that there are some wonderful things happening on London's food and restaurant fronts. But why, I was also left wondering, do they have to be so expensive compared to the rest of the world?

MONDAY

A whistle-stop tour round some of the newer speedy rather than 'fast food' operators whose emphasis is unquestionably on quality rather than purely the bottom line (all those who want to escape the ever-widening clutches of McDonalds please note that a fortnight ago they bought the Heritage chain of hotels from Granada, formerly a part of the Forte empire).

First stop was the new branch of **Fresh & Wild** at 69-75 Brewer Soho (branches also in Camden Town, the City, Lavender Hill, Notting Hill and Stoke Newington, phone 0800-9175175, www.freshandwild.com or email shop@freshandwild.com).

Whereas the other branches have had a slightly cramped feel to them which has not facilitated the proper display of the food this new store - ironically where those old-fashioned butchers, Smith, Clark, Bisney and Jones used to be - offers bags of space for all their breads, takeaway food counters, a small café and juice bar on the ground floor - and a well stocked organic food shop and natural remedy emporium on the new mezzanine level.

The shop carries a huge range from fresh fish and meat to more varieties of muesli and granola than you thought imaginable but in what is perhaps the most refreshing touch the walls are covered with evocative photos, obviously specially taken, of all their suppliers from the man who makes their organic rolls to Bill and Charlotte Reynolds at Swaddles Green Farm, Somerset to Anita Le Roy at the Monmouth Coffee Store, Covent Garden.

Along Brewer Street towards Wardour Street past the Japanese supermarket which sells sushi rice vinegar, the simplest and possibly best addition to a salad dressing, London's Left Handed Shop, which sells exactly what it says it will and a couple of sex shops (this is still Soho, after all) are a not-to-be-missed bread shop, The Bread Shop Company Ltd at no. 17 (020-7434 3408), Lina Stores opposite at no. 18 (020-7437 6482) and Randall & Aubin at no. 16 (020-7287 4447).

The Bread Shop Company (whose original and only other branch is at 65 St John's Wood, NW8, 020-7586 5311) cleverly displays its vast range of breads and viennoiserie, all of which are baked on the premises, in baskets hanging from the ceiling. I call in here for their gluten-free loaf, one of the best I have tried, as like an increasing number of people I am told to steer clear of wheat whenever possible.

It seems presumptuous to write any more in praise of the **Lina Stores**, directly opposite. It has been going 50 years; it still stocks everything an Italian chef, or anyone cooking Italian food would ever want and even if Italian food does not appeal it is still worth calling in here for a glimpse of what Soho used to be in an era before supermarkets, when it was the only place in the country to buy any faintly exotic foodstuff. (When we interviewed the late Jane Grigson she recalled that if in the 1950s and early 1960s you were walking along and spotted someone else with a packet of spaghetti in the old blue wax paper you would wave acknowledging a kindred spirit!)

Buying habits have changed and so too have the contents of **Randall & Aubin** next door. Once a popular boucherie and charcuterie it underwent a contents makeover about a decade ago and is now an elegant brasserie with a décor and range of shellfish that would not look out of place on the Left Bank. What makes this particular transformation so atmospheric is that the original bars from which the hams used to hang have been retained and the tables and stools fitted in around the main pillars and by the front window in a distinctly empathetic and original style. There is no way that Randall & Aubin could be mistaken for a branch of those chains sadly taking over our High Streets. Excellent oysters, langoustines, chicken from the rotisserie and wines by the glass makes this a good stop for lunch or pre- or post-theatre.

From there it was a brisk hike through a deserted Carnaby Street and along Oxford Street to the latest branch of **Carluccio's** which has just opened in St Christopher's Place. These *caffes*, of which this is the third, are a rollout, a joint venture between Antonio Carluccio, the smiling Italian TV presenter and owner of the Neal Street restaurant, Covent

Garden (020-7836 8368) and several backers most notably Peter Weber, who backed the late Bob Payton in the Chicago Pizza Pie Factories.

Carluccio's *caffes* have success stamped all over them. Bright and cheerful, using white and a strong blue throughout, they offer what everyone wants to eat at the moment - good-quality, value-for-money Italian food in comfortable surroundings. A tribute to its winning formula is that on a wet Monday lunchtime when everywhere else seemed quiet this place was hopping and we - a trio in our mid to late 40s - were almost the oldest there. The menu is extensive, our dishes ranging from a plate of *antipasti* to *osso bucco* with saffron risotto to that old favourite, *mozzarella in carrozza*, and all main courses are under £10 with most £6-£8. By the entrance is a delicatessen selling a wide range of salamis and not surprisingly Carluccio's sauces, pasta and books. (Carluccio's other branches are at 8 Market Place, north of Oxford Circus and on the lower ground floor of Fenwick's, New Bond Street. Open 7 days, no bookings).

We did not stay for dessert or coffee because I hankered after the best pastry in town so we took a taxi to **Clarke's** in 124 Kensington Church Street, W8, (0207-221 9225). Clarke's no-choice dinner menu is, I know, not everyone's idea of a restaurant, particularly the French, but at lunch now the restaurant does offer a choice of three dishes at each course.

But for me the real pleasure of Clarke's is the overcrowded shop next door and the tiny café at the back. Here are to be found some of the best breads and patisserie, baked in her Portobello bakery; a great range of British cheeses; top-quality pasta and risotto rice; jams, marmalade and lemon curd made in the kitchens below; organic British asparagus and fresh peas and broad beans from sunny Spain. There is also a wide range of dried goods for any domestic chef. At the back is the chance to squeeze in and sit down for what we thought were the best treacle tart, double chocolate cake and Bakewell tart we had eaten in a long, long while. To order from the shop phone 020-7229 2190 or visit their website www.sallyclarke.com

TUESDAY

As I made my way for a *dim sum* lunch at Alan Yau's new restaurant, **Hakkasan**, 8 Hanway Place, W1 (020-7907 1888) I was reminded of the title of Raymond Chandler's autobiography, *Down Those Mean Streets a Man Must Go*. Certainly, even after Hanway Place and Hanway Street are finished and the pot holes in the ground filled in, these little alleyways will still seem dingy and slightly scary, particularly at night.

Hanway Street is the first on the left off Tottenham Court Road from the junction with Oxford Street and Hanway Place the first on the right off that. At the end, past some as yet empty offices, are an extremely smart grey slate frontage, a doorman in a smart coat and cap and the entrance to Hakkasan.

Yau is no stranger to basements. He was the man responsible for bringing Wagamama to the UK and its first incarnation was in a very unprepossessing basement in Streatham Street, WC1, close to the British Museum, which soon had queues up the stairs and round the block. He fell out with his original partners and went on to open Busaba Eathai at 106 Wardour Street (020-7255 8686), a Thai version of Wagamama where the service has proved to be some of the most charmless I have ever encountered in London.

Hakkasan is different again. Extremely stylish - from the multi-coloured tops the receptionists wear to the carved wooden frame which delineates the central eating area from what Yau hopes will be a busy bar scene around the walls - Hakkasan will succeed despite its difficult location because it will fill a niche that has been empty for a long time in London, a top quality Chinese restaurant under the guidance of chef Tong Chee Whee, formerly at the Ritz Carlton, Singapore.

My *dim sum* that day were certainly as good as any I have eaten at the two branches of **Royal China**, Baker Street, W1 (020- 7487 4688) and W2 (020-7221 2535), the nearby **Mandarin Kitchen** (020-7727 9012) or **Harbour City**, (020-7439 7859) and the cavernous **New World**, Gerrard Place (020-7734 0677 - synonymous with surly service, I am afraid), each hitherto regarded as the best *dim sum* hangouts in town. Steamed Chinese chive dumpling; steamed asparagus *cheung fun* with bamboo pith and dried shitake; fried taro croquette and crispy fried prawn beancurd roll, each just under £4, were excellent, fresh and clean-tasting.

What was distinct, however, about Hakkasan was eating such good *dim sum* in London and not being insulted, ignored or served the food on plates that have obviously seen better days - as in so many other Chinese restaurants in town.

WEDNESDAY

The need to discuss contractual matters with a legal eagle at the BBC (we plan to release an improved DVD of *Jancis*

Robinson's Wine Course in the autumn so get those Christmas stockings ready!) was the pretext for lunch at the **River Café**, W6 (020-7381 8824).

As I walked the very wet 15 minutes from Hammersmith tube station to the restaurant I recalled the admonishment I had once received from an American reader of the *Financial Times* after I had recommended this restaurant. 'We did have a very good meal, thank you, but in our opinion its name is misleading. It is too expensive to be a café and even if you sit by the window there is no view of the river.' She is in fact quite right although the blinds did have to be rolled down at one stage to cut out the sunshine (after which it promptly started raining again) and the only beneficiaries of the river I noticed were the chefs who went out for a smoke about 3.15pm.

And the menu prices promptly remind you that this is not a café. Most first courses are £11-£12, main courses £24-£26 and desserts, £6-£7 and there is nothing to soften the blow. The menu is handwritten; the table cloths are paper and the chairs reasonably but not over comfortable.

My bill for two, including two glasses of Prosecco with blood orange juice, a bottle of high acid 1999 Ribolla from Friuli (£25) that was very good with fish, three courses and an espresso each was £142.50 including service or a staggering US\$200. Was it worth it? Certainly in my opinion and I was paying the bill.

Take for example my dessert. Today, pannacotta is ubiquitous, finding its way on to menus that are Italian, fusion, Mediterranean or worst of all international restaurants but this version, with grappa and caramelised oranges, was one of the finest I have ever eaten. The pannacotta itself was snow-white, studded with vanilla, its sweetness accentuated by the bite of the alcohol and fruit. Delicious!

And whoever is in charge of their wood-burning oven has his or her sense of timing just right. A first course of wood-baked sardine fillets with pinenuts, bread crumbs, chilli, lemon zest and parsley was a great combination of flavours and textures whilst the purple sprouting broccoli and anchovy and rosemary sauce added just the right bite to the wood-roasted, fleshy fillet of translucent John Dory.

As a result of such good food, the walk back to the tube station did not seem anywhere near as long.

THURSDAY

An early evening party in the bar at the Sanderson Hotel, unquestionably the worst acoustics in the city, left us just north of Oxford Street at 9pm, hungry and thirsty. We decided to head back to Hakkasan.

We ate pretty well from a dinner menu completely different to that at lunch, one that is considerably more expensive and one which I am delighted to report offers seven different soups ranging from the more common hot-and-sour combination to the more environmentally unfriendly shark's fin with dried scallop at £38 a bowl and bird's nest and *foie gras* with wolfberry soup, a snip at £45.

Our meal was more mundane: excellent fried soft-shell crab; fried sardines, (again filleted - what a treat!) to dip into a rice vinegar and garlic mixture; stir-fried noodles with enoki and shitake mushrooms and stir-fry celery with ultra-fresh water chestnut and cloud ear were all very good - despite the fact that the kitchen forgot our order for three vegetarian spring rolls. For these and the opportunity to sample the rest of the menu I intend to return.

FRIDAY

A business lunch fixed unusually well in advance yielded the opportunity to return to that old favourite, **J Sheekey** in St Martin's Lane (020-7240 2565, right by Leicester Square tube).

It may seem a conservative choice but I prefer to eat fish at lunch and knowing that my guest enjoys a glass of wine or two I also appreciate their policy of serving about 20 of their 60 wines in 50 cl pichets which meant that we could start with a glass of their Theophile Roederer NV at £7.75 a glass before moving on to a pichet of 1999 Riesling from Leeuwin Estate, Margaret River (£19).

The meal and service were as good as ever. Half a dozen Colchester natives each, then roasted scallops with tarragon mash and a great slab of steamed Scottish halibut that arrived in an immaculately polished copper dish before my guest lapped up a slab of spotted dick with butter and golden syrup and I settled more genteelly for pannacotta (not as good as the River Cafe's) but I was more drawn to the rhubarb on the side. An espresso each and the bill came to £124 before service.

Sheekey's is undoubtedly serving the best food in the group (its siblings include The Ivy (020-7836 4751) and Le Caprice (020-7629 2239) and in what is undoubtedly the litmus test of any restaurant I would choose to eat there the very next time I am in the area. But I did leave with the same two thoughts that dog me whenever I leave any of these three restaurants: why is the wine list not as exciting as the food or the standard of the service and why, when they represent the very best of modern British restauranting, do they still bother with a cover charge of £1.50 per person, an anachronistic policy that, in professional terms, went out with the ark?

FRIDAY NIGHT

Time to eat in. Meals for 10 during this busier than normal week cost a total of £402 - US\$560, 4000 French francs or 24,000 Thai baht (eating out in Thailand is ridiculously good value) - but were as varied and exciting as I could have enjoyed in New York, Paris or Sydney if more expensive. I just hope the taxman will take such an indulgent view.