Nicholas Lander on the pleasures of eating out in London's suburbs

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My mother would not approve, I am sure, but I tend now to answer the question I am most often asked - which London restaurant would you recommend? - with another - where do you live?

The reasons for this are twofold. Firstly, getting across London is increasingly difficult and time-consuming whether it is by public or private transport (unless of course you are extremely wealthy in which case the answer is not a chauffeur-driven limo but your own personal taxi which can take advantage of the slightly more liberated taxi/bus lanes. Do remember that for when you hit the jackpot).

The second is perhaps even more basic - London's suburbs are home to a growing number of good to excellent particular restaurants (ie, not ASK, Café Rouge or members of the Belgo group) which if you are lucky enough to live nearby are a substantial boost to property values not to mention your waistline.

La Trompette at 5 Devonshire Road, Chiswick, W4 (020-8747 1836) is a brand new example of this type of restaurant. Part of the burgeoning Nigel Platts-Martin empire (**The Square**, W1, 020-7495 7100) **Chez Bruce**, SW17 (020-8672 0114) and **The Glasshouse**, Kew (020-8940 6777) this restaurant comprises an exciting new chef, Ollie Couillaud, an extremely well chosen wine list and some very fair fixed-price menus at lunch and dinner.

There are many others which have been filling this niche for longer or shorter stretches of time in other parts of London: **Ransome's Dock**, SW11 (020-7223 1611); **Cotto** W14 (020-7602 9333); **L'Anis**, W8 (020-7795 6533); **Chives**, SW10, (020-7351 4747); **The Green Olive**, W9 (020-7289 2469); **The Vale**, W9, (020-7266 0990); **Rauoul's Cafe**, W9, (020-7289 7313); Parade, W5, (020-8810 0202); **Sonny's**, SW13, (020-8748 0393); **Cucina**, NW3, (020-7435 7814); **The Salt House**, NW8 (020-7328 6626); **Lemonia**, NW1, (020-7586 7454); **Sushi-Say**, NW2 (020-8459 7512 - one of the very best Japanese restaurants in town!); **The White Onion**, N1 (020-7359 3533); **The Real Greek**, N1 (020-7739 8212); **Tentazioni**, SE1, (020-7237 1100); **Delfina Studio Cafe**, SE1 (020-7357 0244) and **Tas**, a very good value modern Turkish restaurant now with two branches in SE1 in The Cut (020-7928 2111) close to the Old and Young Vics and by London Bridge (020-7403 7200).

These chefs and restaurateurs however face two particular hurdles. The first is that by sticking to their job of providing good food and service and staying out of the increasingly intrusive limelight they may be taken for granted and overlooked. The second is that as food and drink pages in the media new and old are obsessed with either the just-opened or youthful at best these more experienced practitioners do not get the attention, compliments and therefore new customers they undoubtedly deserve.

Quite recently, I was guilty of both these professional oversights. Whilst the decision to go out for an early Saturday supper had been taken *en famille* I felt somewhat disgruntled when my first two choices, Le Parisien Chophouse and the new branch of Tas, were both full (after all I am supposed to be the expert!) and a booking had been made, without any discussion with me, in the wine bar at **Odette's**, albeit a long-standing favourite just by Primrose Hill. I knew that I would eat well and drink even better (Odette's wine list has always been good in part due to the presence of wine merchants Bibendum across the street) but what I was annoyed about was that I felt that I was unlikely to learn anything from this old-timer.

I was to be proved wrong on several counts.

Firstly, because Odette's is not in the West End we could walk there and back, although the return was spoilt by a cold wind that brought tears to our eyes (we should probably have drunk more in retrospect). Secondly, because Odette's has not been made over like so many long-established joints or over-designed like so many newer ones and it was comforting to find the same prints on the walls, the same plants, the same lay-out all of which have been well kept and looked after.

And an immediate consequence of this longevity and unchanged style was obvious as soon as we looked at the menu - Odette's prices have remained remarkably stable. Whilst the more glamorous restaurant on the ground floor is more expensive, first courses in the wine bar range from £3.50 to £8 for oysters and only the *côte de boeuf* of the six main courses is over £10.

Nor has this been achieved by any diminution in the portions - a complaint I hear frequently at the moment about the ubiquitous Pizza Express chains. The quantity of crisply fried devilled whitebait (£6.50) looked more like what had been at the bottom of the fishing boat's net and a plate of Spanish charcuterie, marinated anchovies and cherry vine tomatoes was just as copious.

One dish of braised rabbit with balsamic vinegar was dry and overcooked - which the waiter promptly and voluntarily took off our bill - but the rest was very good, most notably crispy risotto balls in a mushroom broth that were as moreish as those we had eaten in Florence last autumn, a warm chocolate tart and a blood orange jelly with ginger *crême anglaise*.

With a half-bottle of 1999 St Nicolas de Bourgueil, mineral water and soft drinks the bill for four came to £88 excluding service. And if you want to know when I paid less than £100 for four for such enjoyable, well cooked food and friendly service you would have to ask my age!

Odette's, 130 Regent's Park Road, NW1, 020-7586 5486.
Closed Saturday lunch and Sunday.