

Restaurants, mushrooms, and slow food

24 Nov 2004 by JR

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Restaurants have played a considerable part in the inner city regeneration that has taken place in the UK over the past five years because they are able to take advantage of the large open spaces created by our industrial past and because they are open far longer than most retail outlets and therefore provide a deterrent to crime.

Hoxton, between fashionable Islington and the City, was once the capital's furniture polishing district but now thanks initially to The Real Greek (tel +44 (0)20 7739 8212) and the White Cube Gallery, its restaurants and bars are buzzing lunchtime and evenings.

The latest newcomer is Cru, a restaurant, bar, and delicatessen in what was a nineteenth-century warehouse. A relaxed atmosphere, bar food and a more sophisticated restaurant are enhanced by an extensive wine list with plenty of choice by the glass, collated by Vincent Gasnier (formerly of Hotel du Vin, a group which, judging by a recent meal at their Tunbridge Wells hotel goes from strength to strength, www.hotelduvin.com).

A lunch after my initial visit just for a drink proved even more exciting. There are two menus, *aperitivi* or substantial *tapas* including platters for two, and a restaurant menu that is brief but exciting. When I was there there was no problem in switching between the two.

The *aperitivi* menu includes bowls of various olives and almonds; spinach and balsamic red onion *frittata* with golden cross cheese; pork *rilette* with grilled wholewheat bread and intriguing plates for two of Scottish smoked salmon, cinnamon smoked salmon, olives, chillis and *wasabi* cream. I had a plate of stewed baby octopus *à la bordelaise* on *bruschetta* that was terrific. Prices range from £2-£5 for these dishes and from £9-£12 for the shared ones.

The restaurant menu is equally interesting: fennel, allspice and Thai basil soup; wood pigeon and pork *rilette* terrine and a salad of roast oyster mushrooms and vine cherry tomatoes are three of the starters. Mains include Moroccan spiced lamb shank with couscous salad; roast Glenarm salmon with chilli oil and Jerusalem artichoke and pinenut turnovers with *arrocina* bean purée (from £10-£15).

I headed straight for a starter that included three of my favourite ingredients rarely seen on one plate: warm ox tongue, pearl barley and a Meaux mustard dressing. Absolutely first class.

With its open kitchens, reasonable prices and exciting wine offer - including a central wine display unit - **Cru**, 2-4 Rufus Street, Hoxton, London, N1 6PE (tel +44 (0)207 729 5252) should prove popular with visitors to this website. Open seven days.

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It is unusual to discover a new restaurant where a good three-course dinner for two costs less than two cinema tickets at the nearby Odeon West End, but that was my experience last week. Cinema tickets £20, dinner for two at Chowki £19.90.

Chowki is, in a nutshell, an upmarket Indian Wagamama but far, far more comfortable, with an emphasis on Indian home-cooking, obliging service, proper crockery, cutlery and glassware.

Its semicircular diningroom is made up of long wooden tables with plush red, backless seats along both sides encouraging communal seating although individual tables can be booked.

The emphasis is on regional cooking, currently the food of Bengal, Rajasthan and Kerala (over the coming year the cooking of 36 regions will be highlighted) and although you can order from any of the 18 dishes on the menu sticking to one regional feast allows you to eat well and copiously for under a tenner each. Great fun.

Chowki, 2-3 Denman Street (off Piccadilly Circus), London W1, (tel +44 (0)20 7439 1330). Open seven days.

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On paper at least it sounds the most unlikely joint venture: on the one side Alain Ducasse who has converted so many French to the lighter cooking styles of the southern Mediterranean and on the other Thierry de La Brosse, proprietor of Chez L'Ami Louis, the ultra-traditional bourgeois bistro in the third *arrondissement* (tel +33 (0)1 48 87 77 48).

But just such a combination has overseen the renaissance of Aux Lyonnais, a traditional brasserie which dates back to 1890, and which will open its doors in mid-October at 32 rue Saint Marc, second *arrondissement*, Paris (tel +33 (0)1 42 96 65 04).

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Perhaps the single biggest bonus from this summer's heavy rainfall across Europe has been an earlier than usual onset of the wild mushroom season which looks like being one of the very best for many years.

Two websites of great interest to anyone who finds wild mushrooms as delicious as I do are www.tastymushroompartnership.co.uk and www.mycologue.co.uk.

The former is the work, and obvious passion, of Peter Jordan who in addition to arranging all kinds of sorties has put together a most practical guide for anyone setting off mushroom picking on their own. It is a collection of 46 plastic coated cards which fit easily in a coat pocket and contain colour photos, descriptions and drawings of the most widely found wild mushrooms. But most useful are the use of one of four symbols to show the edibility status of each, ranging from excellent to deadly. Don't go off mushroom hunting without it, priced £14.99.

Martin Lewy at Mycologue is equally passionate and this year has extended his catalogue to include mushroom breaks at Le Manoir de Prévaisy in Brittany from October to early November.

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Until now the British restaurant industry, like most others worldwide, has been distinguished by a lack of hard facts about its size, structure or even potential for growth.

The *Gold Standard Report 2002* produced by The Restaurant Association in conjunction with BDO Stoy Hayward and HSBC finally rectifies this. There are, it appears, 35,262 restaurants in the UK serving 1739 million meals with a turnover of £11.6 billion employing 288,000 and a median return on capital of 5.4 per cent. This may not appear terribly exciting financially but it is, apparently, good by comparison with the rest of the hospitality industry.

30 per cent of licensed outlets are group owned, the rest independent although not surprisingly 97 per cent of all Chinese/Oriental and Indian/Pakistani restaurants fall into the latter sector. Again, not surprisingly perhaps 70 per cent of respondents are quietly optimistic for the coming year.

This report, invaluable for anyone considering a restaurant investment, costs £125 from The Restaurant Association (tel +44 (0)20 7831 8727, web www.ragb.co.uk).

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One obvious restaurant trend, corroborated by this report, is our growing enthusiasm for Asian cooking and for anyone keen to pursue this at home here are two excellent ways to start.

The first is to enrol with some friends on a day course in Sri's Kitchen run by the indefatigable Sri Owen who has just published *New Wave Asian* (Quadrille £25). The tastings, lunches and dinners all take place in her own kitchen on Wimbledon Village and the day courses range from lessons in home-cooked street food to the essentials of a real curry and a day spent solving the tricky question of what to do with a coconut (tel +44 (0)20 8946 7649, web www.sriowen.com).

And anyone keen to enhance their skills as a sushi chef should log on to www.korin.com, the website of a company based in downtown New York which supplies the traditional range of Korin knives to professional and amateur chefs worldwide. A must for any keen cook anywhere (tel +1 212 587 7021).

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Salone del Gusto, the biannual celebration of food, wine and cookery wonderfully organised by **Slow Food**, takes place in Turin, Italy 24-28 October (www.slowfood.com).

This year it will be distinguished by the presence of 46 artisanal food producers from the UK and Eire, the biggest delegation from outside Italy itself. A must for food-lovers between eight and 80!