

Good (relatively) cheap places to eat

7 Jun 2007 by Nick Lander/BA Business Life

After 27 years in the restaurant business, initially as a restaurateur then as a writer and also as a consultant to numerous arts organisations, I have had to put up with more than my fair share of complaints about the quality of the cooking in British restaurants and, in particular, the cost of eating out in the UK.

It therefore gives me great pleasure to state the following. Firstly, that eating out in Britain has never before been as good as it is today. Secondly, that thanks to numerous young entrepreneurs it is finally now possible to eat well, healthily and inexpensively in London. And as a result, London now vies only with New York as 'restaurant capital of the world'.

These sentiments are echoed by Peter Webber who has spent twice as long in the restaurant business as I have. Having started as a trainee chef in 1954 before running two major London restaurants in the 1970's, Webber has, most recently, steered the colourful **Carluccio's Caffès** to great success on numerous High Streets across the UK. He put the current transformation of British restaurants into even stronger perspective. "In the past restaurateurs thrived because there was invariably one important element of a restaurant's cost structure that was inexpensive. Either the property was cheap or there was cheap labour available or it was possible to buy the food and wine inexpensively from one source or another. Today nothing is cheap and the legislation surrounding the opening of any new restaurant is stricter than at any time in my career. And yet the quality of many of the restaurants today is higher than anything I have ever seen in the past 53 years."

The macro-economic answer to this apparent conundrum lies in former President Bill Clinton's harangue to his election team back in 1992. When he so perceptively explained that 'it's the economy, stupid' that would be the focal point for his future success or not he could just as accurately have been describing the transformation of British restaurants, and those fortunate enough to have been operating or opening in London, over the past decade.

Restaurants are, in essence, quite simple if quite exhausting businesses. The keys to success lie not just in the obvious need to offer distinctive food and service at the right price but also in choosing the appropriate location to generate or meet that demand. And, then finally, most importantly but often the most overlooked factor in any new restaurant: ensuring that the right infrastructure to meet that demand is in place. Dissatisfied customers are as bad for business as empty tables.

According to Ranjit Mathrani, who has masterminded the growth of the inexpensive **Masala Zone** Indian restaurants around London, restaurants are 'the free market at its most simple'. A former top civil servant turned merchant banker, Mathrani has been drawn to the less Machiavellian world of restaurants precisely because of what it represents. "This business is the survival of the fittest," he believes. "And what I have come to realise is that you can fool people more easily and for longer in politics than is possible in the restaurant business."

What Britain's booming economy over the past decade has provided is both the demand and the supply which, in the hands of the numerous skilful chefs and astute restaurateurs, have led to this significant transformation.

The demand has most obviously manifested in the increasing number of people keen to eat out, whether for business or

pleasure. This, combined with the desire of so many to try somewhere new, an appetite fuelled by the internet, has led at its most basic to a significant shift in how restaurants must handle their vital reservations.

When Chris and Jeff Galvin opened **Galvin's**, their extraordinarily good-value *bistrot de luxe* on Baker Street, they did so with a telephone, an old fashioned reservations book and pencil that were simply incapable of coping with the 600 phone calls they were soon receiving every day. And even twelve years after it opened, the **Oxo Tower** has to field five full-time receptionists to cope with the more than 1,000 phone calls it receives daily.

And behind this huge demand are two significant changes that are again the consequences of the UK's booming economy. The first and most obvious is our changing working week which ties far fewer people to lunch between 1230 and 1330 and dinner at 2000 and, as in New York, has led to that often double-edged pleasure 'the working breakfast'.

This change in our lifestyle has been a huge boost to restaurateurs as it has effectively removed any quiet periods from the day. Those behind **The Wolseley**, **Cecconi's**, **Le Pain Quotidien**, **Giraffe**, **Leon**, **Canteen** and **Carluccio's** can all now plan their business models on a 18 hour trading day that run from early morning to late in the evening, a far more lucrative model than that which more formal restaurants have to follow with a two hour lunch period followed by three hours for dinner.

And in staying open for so long these places are not just meeting a demand but also fulfilling a social need. One of the consequences of our current strong economy is that many young adults cannot afford to buy their own flats but continue to live longer with their parents than they would like. But before going to this rather crowded domicile they spend a lot of time and money in the restaurants and cafes that have become, in effect, their 'home from home'.

None of these developments would have led to the rise in standards that have so obviously materialised had the British economy not provided the personnel as well as the spending power. But drawn by the lure of London, the attraction of its clubs after work, the strength of the pounds in their pockets after 6-12 months working here and the realisation that a stint in a top London restaurant will do wonders on their cv's, chefs, waiters, sommeliers and restaurant managers have flooded in – happily because the British catering colleges on their own would have been unable to supply anywhere near enough.

On top of the more obvious sources have come chefs from Austria, Australia and New Zealand; wine waiters in their droves from France keen to taste the wines of the world available in London and waiting staff and receptionists from Poland, Estonia and Latvia. Numerous restaurateurs with sites due to open later this year are, I know, already scouting in Hungary for recruits.

But if all this adds an international aspect to a London that has today become a truly cosmopolitan city then this transformation has also been augmented by several distinctive features.

The first is that because of its location London's restaurateurs and chefs have been able to look to both New York, home for so long to good, inexpensive food and swift service, and for culinary inspiration to Paris. The emergence of **EAT**, **Pret à Manger**, **Giraffe** and **benugo** has added a distinctly open, fresh food presence to the working lives of many while another distinctly New York experience, that of eating at the bar rather than at a more formal table setting is emerging at

Wright Bros Oyster and Porter Bar in Borough, **Arbutus** and **Barrafina** in Frith Street, Soho, and the more elegant but more expensive **Scott's** in Mayfair.

The second has been the decision by many top British chefs to follow the example set by their Parisian counterparts and open more relaxed, less expensive operations. Gordon Ramsay's Restaurant Holdings now extends to a pub, **The Narrow**, in E14 while Tom Aikens oversees not just his restaurant but also the less-expensive Tom's Kitchen nearby. And Shaun Hill, once the recipient of a Michelin star at Gidleigh Park in Devon and The Merchant House in Ludlow is now a partner in **The Glasshouse**, an inexpensive brasserie in the heart of Worcester.

Hill, a remarkably succinct chef, explained the appeal of this shift in his approach as follows. "I have come to realise that cooking with expensive ingredients such as truffles and lobster is just as restricted as any other. And, as we all eat out more often we now don't want too much formality when we do. Long slow cooking, bringing the best flavours out of cheaper cuts has an appeal all of its own and, as far as I am concerned, it keeps my culinary brain active."

The move to this style of cooking, epitomised for me by Fergus Henderson at **St John**, Henry Harris at **Racine**, Bruce Poole at **Chez Bruce** and Jonathon Jones at **The Anchor & Hope**, is perhaps the final example of how significantly eating out in London has changed for the better. And in many ways this is by far and away the most important change because it signals the emergence not just of a whole cadre of British chefs but also ones who have the confidence and ability to ally their style of cooking with many of the top quality food producers who are simultaneously emerging around the UK.

Two particular manifestations of this current confidence are the award for the [50 Top Restaurants](#) created by *Restaurant* magazine and the [Taste of London](#) extravaganza in Regent's Park during the weekend of June 21-24 where chefs cook for and entertain their customers in very relaxed surroundings, an event which this year will be repeated in Bath, Edinburgh, Dublin and Birmingham.

But what makes me most optimistic about the future of eating out is the emergence of two distinctive, relaxed eating places, **Canteen** and **Leon** which, although very different, have both been founded by a triumvirate of passionate individuals in their mid-30's.

Patrick Clayton-Malone, whose background was entertainment, met Dominic Lake, an MBA with a venture capitalist background, three years ago to discuss a possible new venture. Fuelled by a passion for a food and a friendship with chef Cass Titcombe they reached the conclusion that what was missing was somewhere that offered great British food at reasonable prices, in particular an enjoyable and satisfying meal for under £20, in a modern, well designed and democratic environment. Canteen in Spitalfields was their inspired creation and justifiably recently won the *Observer* Food magazine's award for Best Restaurant of 2007.

Four years ago John Vincent and Henry Dimbleby were colleagues at management consultants, Bain & Co, on the Strand fantasising about venues for healthy, fun and inexpensive lunch venues. They got together with chef Allegra McEvedy and after numerous brainstorming sessions and focus groups came up with their first Leon in Carnaby Street, a location specifically chosen by Vincent because it was surrounded by branches of Starbucks, Pret and Coffee Republics. Out of this lions' den, Leon has prospered thanks to its combination of friendly service, fresh, healthy and inexpensive food and its success at leaving with the customer the impression that life is just that much better after some good food.

I hope both Canteen and Leon will prosper although they intend to do so very differently. Canteen is only now opening its second site in the refurbished Royal Festival Hall while there will be eight Leon's by the end of 2007. And under its slogan of 'the best food for the most people' Vincent is aiming for 2020 branches of Leon internationally by 2020.

That may be optimistic but given the current interest in British chefs and food not impossible particularly if the economy continues to prosper.

TEN GOOD VALUE RESTAURANTS

The Ambassador, www.ambassadorcafe.co.uk

55 Exmouth Market

London EC1 020-7837 0009

Uncomplicated, strong flavoured cooking

The Anchor & Hope,

36 The Cut, London SE1, 020-7928 9898.

No bookings but great food in this no-frills pub.

Arbutus, www.arbutusrestaurant.co.uk

63-4 Frith Street, London W1, 020-7734 4545.

Inspired cooking from Anthony Demetre and an equally professional restaurant team led by Will Smith.

Galvin Bistrot de Luxe, www.galvinbistrotdeluxe.co.uk

66 Baker Street, London W1

Chris and Jeff Galvin's homage to French food –as good as any in Paris!

The Glasshouse,

Sidbury, Worcestershire 01905-611120

A bright, modern brasserie in the heart of a delight market city.

Masala Zone, www.realindianfood.co.uk

With several outposts around London. Masala Zone offers fun, friendly and authentic Indian food for all ages.

Racine,

239 Brompton Road, London SW3, 020-7584 4477.

Where chef Henry Harris delivers the French food that initially excited him when travelling to France as a child.

Tapas Brindisa, www.brindisa.com

18-20 Southwark Street, SE1, 020-7357 8880.

Terrific tapas and hams in the heart of London Bridge's booming food market.

The Narrow, www.gordonramsay.com/thenarrow

44 Narrow Street, London E14, 020-7592 7950

Gordon Ramsay's first foray into pubs.

Tom's Kitchen,

27 Cale Street, London SW3, 020-7823 3652.

Informal and fun – if noisy!

Vinoteca, www.vinoteca.co.uk

7 St John Street, London EC1, 020-7253 8786

A great wine selection and equally good bistro-style cooking. No bookings at dinner.

