



Written by
Nick Lander
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My top 20 London restaurants



This is an article that I write most reluctantly.

I hate putting restaurants into lists, whether it is the World's Top 50 (of which I used to be a judge) or any of the alternatives being planned. I simply don't believe that anyone can quantify the essentials of a restaurant into a meaningful arithmetical formula. And that, even if this were possible, what possible use could it be to anyone living in London that all the best restaurants were in a completely different city? It is, I believe, a most inappropriate way of evaluating restaurants.

But in today's world, it is a system that is all too popular. And the one question I am most frequently asked is along the lines of 'Which is your favourite restaurant?' My stock answer is of course one of our son Will's three: The Quality Chop House, Portland or Clipstone, for a variety of reasons but primarily it is the combination of good food, good wine, friendly service and the

inordinate pride any parent would get from seeing what many consider to be the hardest job in the world being conducted so professionally by a member of your own family.

What do the restaurants I list below as my favourites have in common, other than that they each offer very good food, extremely good wine (or tea) and friendly, welcoming service?

Well, first of all, they all, with the exception of two, offer an à la carte menu. They may each of them offer a tasting menu but that is secondary. There is no sense of a prescriptive approach dictated by the kitchen or the chef. This means that you don't have to give up more than a couple of hours to enjoy any of these.

Then they all offer comfortable rooms within which to sit (I write this after a bottom-numbing lunch at the counter at The Barbary in Covent Garden) and reasonably good acoustics. They fulfil one of the basic functions of any restaurant – that you can hear what your companion has to say. Each of these will restore you to good humour at the end of your meal.

So, these three restaurants of our son's aside, here is a list of my favourite London restaurants.

A Wong Unquestionably, Andrew Wong is the most fascinating Chinese chef at work in London today. And, most conveniently, his restaurant is close to Victoria Station. www.awong.co.uk

Four Seasons My favourite place in Chinatown for prawn dumpling soup followed by possibly the best roast duck in the world. No bookings and quite cramped but first-class value. 12 Gerrard Street, London W1D 5PR is my favourite branch. www.fs-restaurants.co.uk

Indian Accent A very modern interpretation of Indian food via New York – no rice as a separate, and additional, course, for example. But inspired cooking married with excellent spicing. www.indianaccent.com

Gymkhana Very close by and also in Albemarle Street, this hugely popular Indian restaurant (part of the JSK group) appeals partly for its cooking, particularly game, but also for its sense of fun and humour. www.gymkhanalondon.com

Le Gavroche Classic French food, although now served with a much lighter emphasis, from a great team headed by Michel Roux Jr, marathon runner and Manchester United supporter. www.le-gavroche.co.uk

The Palomar Modern Israeli food served either at tables at the rear or at the fashionable kitchen counter pictured above. It is a difficult place in which to hold a conversation but an impossible place to leave feeling anything other than extremely happy. www.thepalomar.co.uk

Hunan The exception to the rule as this restaurant serves only a set menu but based on a long tradition of experience. And this cooking style is enhanced by the wine knowledge of Michael, the chef's son, particularly of German Rieslings. www.hunanlondon.com

Park Chinois Alan Wong's extravagance in Mayfair will appeal to two very diverse audiences: those who are looking for a quiet place for excellent dim sum at lunchtime and those in the mood, in the evening, for a more glamorous night out. www.parkchinois.com

J Sheekey The classic British fish restaurant, still a treat whether for theatregoers, tourists or simply proud Londoners showing off their culinary history. www.j-sheekey.co.uk

Barrafina Now physically a part of Quo Vadis, this highly authentic copy of Cal Pep in Barcelona was the first London restaurant to offer this immediate style of counter seating so close to the kitchen staff. www.barrafina.co.uk

Chez Bruce Opened with culinary input from chef Bruce Poole and the restaurant and wine skills of Nigel Platts-Martin, this restaurant is a seemingly easy combination of their respective skills but one that never disappoints. www.chezbruce.co.uk

Clarke's Opened over 30 years ago by Sally Clarke, this restaurant continues to delight anyone with an appetite for good food, good wine, great bread and wonderful desserts. There is also ample space between tables – and great art on the walls too. www.sallyclarke.com

The Araki Another exception to the rule, in that here there is only a set menu, but this is really because although the address is New Burlington Street, it might just as well be in central Tokyo. The finest sushi in town and a great show put on by Mr and Mrs Araki and their team. Very small and very expensive. www.the-araki.com

St John A long-time favourite – and the setting for my fiftieth birthday party several years ago – this restaurant remains unchanged. There is still nothing on the walls and the acoustics are poor; yet the combination of their Eccles cake together with some Lancashire cheese is unbeatable. www.stjohnrestaurant.com

Spring Another establishment run by a sensitive and warm-hearted woman, this time Skye Gyngell, who has transformed this part of Somerset House and has her eyes set on transforming even more – such as the abolition of all plastic from the kitchen. www.springrestaurant.co.uk

Brawn Ed Wilson's homage to the many different cooking styles of Europe, from France to Italy and Spain, all brought together into one concise menu. Far more sensitive cooking than its name would suggest. www.brawn.co

The River Cafe Neither a café nor a restaurant with views of the Thames from its tables, this particular very Italian outpost in Hammersmith remains a firm favourite for the authenticity of its food, its wines and the overall joy its staff manage to convey. www.rivercafe.co.uk

Caravan These cafés have become renowned for the coffee they roast themselves but it is the quality, and relaxed nature, of the cooking that attracts me. A long-time favourite, which Miles Kirby remembers picking up in a Maori café in Auckland, is their coconut bread smothered with lemon curd and rhubarb. Also unmissable are their morning buns based on a recipe from San Francisco. www.caravanrestaurants.co.uk

The Ledbury Brett Graham's culinary gem. Once a pub, it is now a glamorous restaurant in Notting Hill with a tiny basement kitchen from which Graham and his team manage to produce an extraordinary range of complex dishes. Another Platts-Martin establishment. www.theledbury.com

La Trompette Now home to chef Rob Weston, this is the kind of neighbourhood restaurant that every suburb should be able to boast of but few can. Just off Chiswick High Road and another restaurant from wine-loving restaurateur Nigel Platts-Martin, so the wine list is exemplary. www.latrompette.co.uk