

Food for Thought: Changing of the Guard --- Strange But True: Good Asian Food Abounds in London

By Robert Templer

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Michelin-starred chefs are in the same fame league and tax bracket as soccer stars and Spice Girls, newspapers devote about half their pages to restaurant reviews and suburban supermarkets have entire aisles devoted to Thai ingredients. England is no longer, as Napoleon said, a nation of shopkeepers. It is now a place where everyone aspires to own a Pan-Asian or New British seafood bistro serving the best organic produce in a minimalist setting.

Asian food has taken off here unlike any other city in Europe. Finding a good Asian meal in Paris, Rome or Berlin is a near impossibility as these countries have clung to their own culinary traditions -- to the exclusion of almost all others. The British have welcomed all comers and London now has probably the best array of Asian restaurants of any city outside Asia itself. From perilously expensive contemporary Japanese to some of the best and cheapest Indian food outside the subcontinent, London has everything.

Since the British Tourist Board has declared curry as the national dish, we'll start this tour of London there. Indian food was the first Asian cuisine to break into Britain and it wasn't long until it fell into ill repute. Identical Indian restaurants mushroomed across the country serving lurid orange tandoori dishes that all tasted the same; indeed, an urban myth circulated of one enormous kitchen producing all the food. Vindaloo -- originally a Goan curry flavored with Portuguese inflections of wine and garlic but mutated by the English into an over-spiced variant of napalm -- became the essential chaser to 12 pints of beer late on a Saturday night.

FULL TEXT

No country has seen such a culinary turnaround occur so quickly as England. Just a few years ago produce like avocados were bewilderingly exotic, garlic was a despised foreign threat to national integrity and boiling was the favored cooking technique for everything. Now you can't shut the English up about how good their food is.

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urban myth circulated of one enormous kitchen producing all the food. Vindaloo -- originally a Goan curry flavored with Portuguese inflections of wine and garlic but mutated by the English into an over-spiced variant of napalm -- became the essential chaser to 12 pints of beer late on a Saturday night.

But prepackaged supermarket versions of curries and tandooris have devastated many businesses and the second generation often don't want to follow their parents into the business. There are an estimated 3,500 Indian restaurants in greater London but the number is coming down as about three a week close across Britain. Those that want to survive have had to adapt.

No longer able to get away with throwing precooked meats together with prepackaged sauces, they have rediscovered the vast variety of regional food and traditional preparations. Brick Lane, not far from the City of London, has 43 restaurants offering a range of Bangladeshi and Indian foods ranging from the trendy, modern Cafe Naz to the cheap dives set up to cater to immigrant garment workers.

Malabar, a restaurant just off Notting Hill Gate in West London, is a good example of the new trend in everything from its short, seasonally changing menu to its interior of blond wood and abstract art. Served in small steel cans, the dishes at Malabar are lighter and more distinctly spiced than most Indian restaurants. A dish of lamb cooked with mint and yogurt had a clarity of flavor that you don't often find in slow-cooked dishes. Like many updated restaurants, Malabar is also bringing in ingredients like venison and pumpkin that are generally new to Indian food in England.

The other transformation in London restaurants has been the arrival of haute fusion restaurants from New York. Jean-Georges Vongerichten has opened a branch of Vong and Nobu Matsuhisa's eponymous restaurant has been a huge hit. These restaurants, along with the haute Chinese restaurant Oriental at the Dorchester Hotel, and more established fusion haunts such as The Sugar Club have raised the culinary bar for Asian food in London.

Bali Sugar is the offspring of The Sugar Club but focusing on a Japanese-Latin American mix not unlike Nobu but with more conventional presentation and cooking. Bali Sugar has the pared down decor of almost every restaurant in London, where the decorative flourishes are now strictly for the food. While preferable to the faux colonial look of bamboo and palms that every Asian restaurant seemed to sport until recently, the bareness of the restaurants seem chilly and austere in the middle of a dank winter day, the light already dimming just after lunch. Fortunately this is balanced by a warming winter menu that manages to be comforting without being too heavy.

The restaurant brings together such Latin ingredients as yucca, plantains and limes with nori, miso and a Japanese sensitivity to fish. Prawn ceviche, a dish in which raw fish is "cooked" in lime juice, was a sweeter, less acidic version of the dish that could have done with a note of chili to brighten its flavors. Mushroom nori roll, sheets of seaweed wrapped around mushrooms and then cooked in a tempura batter, was light and subtly textured but slightly under-flavored. It would have benefited from a muskier wild mushroom.

Bali Sugar shines brighter in the main courses. Duck was cooked until it was dark and tender. Paired with a sticky reduction of plums and ancho chilis, it was unctuous and rich in the way duck should be. The salmon was perfectly cooked, moist and yet wrapped in a crispy skin. A cucumber kimchi was a sharp touch that went well with the fish. Desserts are more European than Asian or Latin. A coffee bavarois, slightly too wobbly with gelatin, came with a sweet tuile cookie filled with crushed pepper. A dense chocolate tart was less imaginatively matched with lychees.

Indian and Chinese cuisines are well represented in London but Southeast Asian is catching up. The East End has several good, cheap Vietnamese restaurants and there are a growing number of Thai restaurants. Malaysian food is

common, and although there are now several Indonesian restaurants around, none of them command much respect.

One of the newest Asian restaurants is Southeast W9, owned by Vatcharin Bhunichtr, a restaurateur known by his diminutive Vatch who has written a number of successful cookbooks on Thai food. Southeast W9 aims to bring together food from across Southeast Asia under one roof in what is unsurprisingly a stark white interior decorated with abstract art.

But this gathering of foods is a recipe for convenience and it provides a rare taste of Cambodian, Burmese and Laotian food in London. Sadly it has also ironed out some of the distinctiveness of each cuisine. Nga Pe Thoke, a Burmese fish cake salad, and Goi Ga, a Vietnamese chicken and sesame salad, were crisp but shared too many of the same underlying flavors. Thai, Indonesian and Singaporean dishes also appear but they all start to taste a little too much the same by the end of the meal. However, the food is fresh and tasty, if a little underspiced and oversalted, and prices are reasonable in a city where Thai food is unjustifiably expensive and underwhelming.

Send comments to awsj.food@awsj.com

Where and How Much
Malabar: 27 Uxbridge Road. London W8. Tel: 0171 727-8800. Noon to 3
p.m. for lunch. 6 p.m. to 11:30 p.m. for dinner. First courses \$5,
main courses \$8.
Bali Sugar: 33A All Saints Road W11 Tel: 020 7221-4477. 12:30 p.m. to
3 p.m. for lunch, 6:30 p.m. to 11 p.m. for dinner. First courses \$10,
main courses \$24; wines range from \$24 to \$65. Good wine list but
expensive. Reservations needed in the evening.
Southeast W9: 239 Elgin Avenue W9. Tel: 020 7328-8883. Noon to 11
p.m. daily. First courses \$8, main courses \$10 to \$15.
The best guide to London restaurants is Time Out's "Eating and
Drinking." It costs \$15 and comes in an inconveniently large size but

it will lead you to the best food London has to offer.

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