



LONDON'S GASTRONOMIC REVOLUTION

England's capital has transformed from the gastronomic sick man of Europe into one of the culinary capitals of the world within a single generation. **Joseph Reaney** finds out how

London's fine-dining scene during the 1980s was rather different to today. Back then, a well-regarded restaurant could survive by serving a three-course menu of a prawn cocktail (cold shrimps drowned in ketchup and mayo), a kidney-filled pie, and a worryingly wobbly dessert. Those with the airs and graces to order wine may be offered simply "red or white". And if you had asked an Italian, an American or a French person about the city's culinary credentials, they'd be reaching for the joke books.

Yet, less than 30 years on, the story could not be more different. In 2014 London is considered to be one of the culinary capitals of the world. So, how has the British capital managed to pull off this great transformation over

the course of a single generation? It boils down to a few key elements, from diversity to creativity.

CHANGING ATTITUDES

The first and perhaps most significant impact on London's culinary scene in the last 30 years has been the changing attitudes of the population. Since the recession of the early '80s, incomes in the UK have steadily increased, leading to a burgeoning middle class—especially in London—who began to travel overseas. Exposure to more refined cuisine and smarter service meant they returned home with greater knowledge, more distinguished palates and heightened expectations, which led to more fine-dining restaurants opening in the city, eager to service a new breed of Londoner who valued quality over cost.

Too good to eat

Sea trout crudo at Nuno Mendes' Chiltern Firehouse, one of the most sought after restaurants in London

London

Michelin-starred Marcus Wareing, chef patron of Marcus at The Berkeley, believes Britain has been through a huge cultural shift when it comes to food. "Our attitudes to food have changed immensely over the last 30 years," he says. "Food has become more and more central to our daily lives. We've very much followed the European approach to food, where the kitchen is the heart of the home and meal times are central to life, bringing families and friends together to enjoy great food and wine."

"We are also now far more aware of what we're eating, the nutritional value, and the origin of produce than we were 30 years ago," he adds. The growth in organic and fair-trade restaurants in London has been huge, but there's also an increasing amount of restaurants catering to specialist diets, from vegetarian and vegan to gluten-free.

Leading chef Alyn Williams believes this shift in attitudes is the biggest contributor to the UK capital's new status as a culinary heavyweight.

Regal splendour
(below) Mandarin Oriental Hyde Park London is home to the UK's top-rated restaurant, Dinner by Heston Blumenthal

"Bit by bit, Britain has evolved from a country of culinary philistines to a nation of real foodies"

"The change in British attitudes to food is immeasurable," he claims. "As diners, we've become much more open-minded. The dining culture has transformed from the bottom to top-end; to every cooking level and price range you can imagine. I think the pub-dining scene — this casual, yet sophisticated, way of dining — has revolutionised the way we look at eating out. We are now punching our weight alongside Paris, Barcelona and Milan, and that wasn't always the case."

STAR POWER

Bit by bit, Britain has evolved from a country of culinary philistines to a nation of real foodies. Dining out, once considered the wasteful extravagance of city bankers, has become a regular expectation for people of almost all

backgrounds and incomes. Cookery programmes began to dominate television schedules and celebrity chefs like Marco Pierre White brought rock-and-roll glamour to the stuffy world of haute cuisine. Today's star chefs, like Jamie Oliver, Gordon Ramsay and Nigella Lawson, oversee multi-million-dollar empires.

"The rise of the 'celebrity chef' has changed the culinary landscape in a very positive way," explains Wareing. "People gravitate to them and listen and learn from them. Look at what Jamie Oliver has done. Not only has he opened up a new breed of restaurants to London, offering delicious but very affordable food, he has also connected in a real way to the average person regarding standards of home cooking."



Photo: Alisa Comnan



Fresh flavours
(clockwise from bottom) Traditional savoury porridge with roast cod at Dinner by Heston Blumenthal; the chef in his London kitchen with head chef Ashley Palmer-Watts; decadent desserts at Alyn Williams at The Westbury



Photo: Ashley Palmer-Watts

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It's also worth noting that London's food revolution has been led by a re-emergence of quality British cuisine. The 2014 World's 50 Best Restaurants list has London restaurant Dinner by Heston Blumenthal, renowned for serving traditional and historical British dishes, at number five, while fellow London diner The Ledbury also features in the top 10. "Chefs like Tom Kerridge and Nathan Outlaw use brilliant British produce and old-fashioned recipes and make them new, relevant and interesting," says Atul Kochhar, chef patron at Benares in Mayfair. "This has really changed the way people in the UK think about British food."

CULTURAL RICHES

London in the 21st century is the very definition of a cultural melting

pot. Today, London's population is approximately 8.5 million people, of which more than a third were born outside of the country, with many more considering themselves of non-British descent. As such, London boasts a UN of dining options.

"We have always been a culturally-rich capital, and have a long history of immigration which has always been reflected in our restaurants," says Williams. "When I was growing up, we had a lot of Indian, Jewish and classic European places to eat." But he believes that the diversity on dining in London has increased rapidly since then. "Since the 1980s we have seen a sharp rise in Eastern European and African restaurants. I think the unique character in London's dining scene is down to its diversity, as we have almost every

Reservation required

(top to bottom)
Everyone's who's anyone is queuing up for a table at the Chiltern Firehouse; Atul Kochhar's Benares Restaurant & Bar in Mayfair

EATING OUT CHEFS' RECOMMENDATIONS

BEST OF BRITISH

Marcus Wareing suggests heading to Covent Garden: "Seven Dials is fast becoming a very vibrant culinary hotspot of London, and we are set to add to this lively neighbourhood through our latest venture, **Tredwell's** (www.tredwells7dials.com)." Elsewhere, Atul Kochhar recommends **Chiltern Firehouse** (www.chilternfirehouse.com), while Michel Roux Jr points visitors to **The Dairy** (www.the-dairy.co.uk) in Clapham: "A great local restaurant that serves delicious food with warm, friendly service."

INTERNATIONAL FLAVOUR

Alyn Williams proclaims, "I still have a love of finer dining, so I would say that H  l  ne Darroze at **The Connaught** (www.helenedarroze.com) is among my favourites. I also enjoy good Indian and Chinese food, so I recommend Vivek Singh's cooking at **Cinnamon Club** (www.cinnamonclub.com) and the dim sum restaurants in Chinatown." Meanwhile, Kochhar reveals a soft spot for the French diner **Hedone** (www.hedonerestaurant.com) for its "brilliant sourcing", as well as **Sticks'n'Sushi** (www.sticksnsushi.com) for Euro-Japanese fusion fare.

CREATIVE DINING

Says Wareing: "Brixton Village and Northcote Road showcase London's variety and adventurous approach to food." Williams names **The Clove Club** (www.thecloveclub.com), **Bubbedogs** (pictured below; www.bubbedogs.co.uk) and **Bone Daddies** (www.bonedaddiesramen.com) among his picks, while Kochhar says some of the best meals are also the cheapest. "We have the best ramen bars, burger joints and wood-fired oven pizza, and you can eat brilliantly for just GBP 10 (US \$16.85)."



Photo: Tim Clinch



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nationality on earth represented within the city. I reckon you will find over 100 different cuisines by country here, and I doubt there are many other cities that can boast that.”

In reality, that’s probably a conservative estimate. At the top end of the dining scene alone, things are extraordinarily diverse. London has Michelin-starred restaurants serving British, Indian, Italian, French, Chinese, Spanish, Portuguese, Japanese and Peruvian food, while hundreds of other international diners have landed top culinary awards.

“London is the most diverse city in the world,” claims Michel Roux Jr, the dynamic two-Michelin-starred chef at Le Gavroche. “It is a vibrant melting pot of top-class cuisine, with chefs coming from just about everywhere to set up here.” Kochhar agrees: “Probably because of the Empire and due to the UK’s approach to travel, we have the most vibrant food scene in the world. There’s no other country that can match the breadth and variety we can offer here; this is the most exciting place in the world to eat out.”

Culinary evolution
(clockwise from top) Michel Roux Jr. at Le Gavroche; the dining room of Le Gavroche, the first restaurant in the UK to be awarded three Michelin stars in 1982; a trio of ceviche dishes at SushiSamba

KITCHEN CREATIVITY
Ironically for a city of such creativity (the birthplace of John Keats, Alfred Hitchcock and David Beckham) British food traditionally lacked imagination. Yet, in the last 30 years, things have changed, and London has been at the forefront of a number of global culinary developments, including trends such as ‘molecular gastronomy’ (a scientific approach that looks at the physical and chemical transformations of food elements during cooking), restaurant trends like ‘multi-sensory dining’ (a radical culinary concept proposed by Heston Blumenthal, in which dishes are complemented by songs or works of art), and kitchen trends such as chef collaborations and exchanges.

These new concepts allow diners to experience more styles and chefs to try out new ways of presenting ingredients.

“This newfound readiness to adapt and experiment has certainly contributed to London’s rise from culinary whipping boy to gastronomic guru”



Decorated dining
(top to bottom)
Head chef Brett Graham in the kitchen at The Ledbury; tartlet of English strawberries, flowers and honey cream at The Ledbury



London

“They are a great way to eat food by chefs you would otherwise find difficult to visit,” says Williams. Wareing adds: “The best thing about London is there are always exciting new pop-ups, street vendors, restaurants, cafés, markets, delis and food stores springing up all across the city. This is what gives London its unique buzz.”

When it comes to fine dining, Kochhar believes there are a handful of restaurants that have left a particularly unique impression in recent years. “St. John (and the nose-to-tail eating concept) had a huge impact on people’s approach to offal and making the most of every animal; The River Café taught us that there’s an art to special dining that retains its casual feel; and I think that SushiSamba has reminded us that Londoners like a bit of glitz and glamour, too. They’ve all had a positive impact on how we eat out.”

This newfound readiness to adapt and experiment has certainly contributed to London’s rise from culinary whipping boy to gastronomic guru. While other major foodie cities with strong and respected culinary traditions have proved reluctant to mess with tried-and-tested formulas, London’s less-

Table for two

(from right) Marcus Wareing says food has become more and more central to our daily lives over the last 30 years; SushiSamba’s rooftop terrace commands spectacular views of London and the River Thames



stellar reputation has given chefs the confidence to constantly experiment, reinvent and reinvigorate. “British chefs like to be more experimental, and are influenced by international cuisines,” explains Roux Jr. “They are less worried about maintaining traditional approaches to creating dishes. This sets London’s restaurant scene apart.”

With such an incredibly diverse range of dining options available — from

traditional British cuisine to inventive international fare—and a multi-cultural population with an endless appetite for dining out, it’s no wonder London can now compete with the likes of Paris, Rome and Tokyo as the fine-dining capital of the world. And Williams believes we’re only seeing the beginning: “With every generation, lots of talented cooks are emerging. I look forward to seeing what the next 20 years bring.” ■



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