

Changing of the Guard

How London Became the Culinary Capital of the World



Traditionally, London does not have a sterling reputation for food. Yet over the last 30 years, the city has experienced a culinary revolution, and is now one of the world's great foodie capitals. So how has this happened? It's down to three things: heightened expectations, greater diversity and enhanced creativity.

Expectations

The first—and perhaps most significant—impact on London's culinary scene in the last 30 years has been changing attitudes and expectations. Britain has been through a huge cultural shift regarding food in the last 30 years. In the eighties, it was generally the case that quantity won over quality. Back then, it was accepted that ham came in tins and pudding came in sachets; that Sunday carveries were the extent of most people's eating out excursions; and that 'fine dining' meant pompous French waiters and minuscule portions. But as the country emerged from a recession, incomes steadily increased, the aspirational middle class grew, and British people—and Londoners in particular—began to travel overseas. In countries like Italy and the US, Britons exposed themselves to a higher quality of cuisine and better service, and would return with greater knowledge and more distinguished palates. And with that came higher expectations.

Slowly but surely, Britain became a nation of foodies. Dining out, once firmly considered the domain of City bankers with more money than sense, suddenly became an expectation for people of almost every background and income. Cookery shows came to dominate television schedules, and leading chefs like Jamie, Gordon and Nigella rapidly accumulated their fame, fortunes, and global restaurant empires. As the 90s arrived, a lukewarm serving of corned beef hash or jam roly-poly could no longer sate the country's collective appetite—Britons were demanding more interesting, boundary-pushing local fare, and were willing to pay for it. As the new millennium rolled in, a booming economy led to the openings of many new restaurants in the capital, plus an ever-increasing amount of Londoners with money to burn.

Alyn Williams, Head Chef at the eponymous *Alyn Williams at the Westbury* (and a former National Chef Of The Year), claims this shift in attitude is the biggest contributor to London's new status as a culinary heavyweight. "The change in British attitudes to food is almost immeasurable," he purports. "As diners, we have become so much more open-minded. The dining culture has [transformed] from the bottom to top end; to every cooking level and price range that you could imagine. I think that the pub dining scene—this casual, yet sophisticated, way of dining—has revolutionised the way we today look at eating out."

Considering its less-than-glowing reputation, it might surprise some to learn that London's revolution has been led by a re-emergence of quality British fare. The highly-regarded World's 50 Best Restaurants list has two London restaurants within the top 10—*Dinner by Heston Blumenthal* (number 5) and *The Ledbury* (number 10)—and both are known for their traditional British dishes with

contemporary twists. "We are now truly punching our weight along with the likes of Paris, Barcelona and Milan," claims Alyn.

His personal recommendation for enjoying the best of British cuisine is to frequent a Jason Atherton restaurant: "I like what he's doing with his ever-growing empire." For example, *Pollen Street Social*, a hip contemporary bistro offering 'de-formalised dining'. Diners here can try tasty signature British dishes like roast Scottish partridge with confit savoy cabbage, Alsace bacon, mulled wine salsify and chocolate, orange & juniper berry crumb.

Diversity

London in the mid-1980s was already relatively multicultural, but London in the 21st century is the very definition of a melting pot. Today, London's population is 8.5 million people—around two million more than in 1985—and a large amount of this growth is attributed to increased immigration. In the city's 2011 census, it was revealed that more than a third of the city's residents were born outside of the country, while many more considered themselves of non-British descent. Today, with 300 languages spoken within its borders, London is one of the most culturally diverse cities on earth. This huge influx of people from all around the world into the capital has had a dramatic impact on the variety of its cuisine.

"London is the most diverse city in the world," claims Michel Roux Jr (photo, p. 28), the world-famous 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." Alyn Williams also trumpets this diversity. "I think the unique character in London's dining scene is down to this, as we have almost every 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, 100 different cuisines is probably a conservative estimate. Even at the top end of the dining scene, things are incredibly diverse. London has Michelin-starred restaurants specialising in British, Indian, Italian, French, Chinese, Spanish, Portuguese, Japanese and Peruvian food, while hundreds of other international diners have garnered other culinary awards. Then there are the small bistros, cafés and market stalls selling delicious food that takes in all four corners of the world. Almost every culinary urge can be satisfied here, whether you desire Polish bigos, Jamaican jerk chicken, Mexican tostadas, Nigerian ogbono soup or Vietnamese bánh mì. That raises it above other culinary capitals such as Paris, Rome and Tokyo, which each serve divine local cuisine but have relatively modest international options.

Diversity is also a sentiment echoed by Atul Kochhar, Chef Patron at the award-winning Indian-British restaurant *Benares*.



Tongue and salad: The "Nose to Tail" approach of St John Restaurant had an impact on the whole culinary scene.

"Probably due to the Empire and due to the UK's approach to travel, we have the most vibrant food scene in the world," he says. "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." When it comes to international restaurants, Atul Kochhar reveals: "I would recommend *Sticks'n'Sushi*, which has European and Japanese fusion cuisine." Originally opened in Wimbledon, and now also in Covent Garden, this Japanese-Danish concept restaurant offers scrummy sushi and grilled yakitori sticks.

Creativity

Considering London is a city that has spawned such creativity—with locals ranging from Samuel Pepys to Charlie Chaplin, John Keats to Amy Winehouse—the local food has traditionally lacked imagination. Yet in the last 30 years, things have drastically changed, and London has been at the forefront of a number of global culinary developments. These include food preparation trends such as 'molecular gastronomy' (a scientific approach that looks at the physical and chemical transformations of food elements during cooking), restaurant atmosphere trends like 'multi-sensory dining' (a radical culinary concept proposed by chef Heston Blumenthal,



Chef Heston Blumenthal (right) leads the "New Cookery" wave in London.

in which dishes are complemented by songs or by works of art), and kitchen trends like chef collaborations and exchanges. No other capital can match London for culinary creativity.

"The best thing about London is there is always something new and exciting," says Marcus Wareing. "New pop-ups, street vendors, restaurants, cafés, markets, delis and food stores spring up all across the city, and this is what gives London its unique buzz." Atul Kochhar points to a few restaurants in particular that have given a 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 there's an art to special dining that retains its casual feel. And *SushiSamba* reminds us that Londoners like a bit of glitz and glamour. They have all had a positive impact on how we eat out."

This new-found creativity has provided the spark for London's great gastronomic makeover. While other European cities with clear, culinary traditions have been understandably reluctant to change centuries-old tried-and-tested recipes, London's less tantalising traditions have allowed today's chefs the freedom to dismantle and reconstruct elements of the cuisine. Michel Roux Jr sums it up when he says: "British chefs like to be more experimental, and are influenced by international cuisines; they are less worried about maintaining traditional approaches to creating dishes. This sets London's restaurant scene apart."

Photo: Alisa Conner

When it comes to places to eat, Marcus Wareing has no hesitation in recommending low-cost. "London offers great local artisan places to explore, and Brixton Village is one case in point of London's amazing variety and adventurous approach to food," he says. Diners will find incredible international creativity on a shoestring, with highlights ranging from curried burgers to sourdough pizza to Pakistani street food.

When you combine this culinary invention with London's increasingly cosmopolitan society and a seemingly endless appetite for dining out, it's little wonder that London has staked its claim to be the fine dining capital of the world. Whether it can stay there is another question. But Alyn is confident. "Over the last 20 years we have seen a culinary family tree take root and flourish. With every generation a lot of very talented cooks are emerging. This is not going to stop... I look forward to what the next 20 years brings!"

London-based Joseph Reaney is a British travel writer and editor for international publications including USA Today, Forbes Travel Guide, National Geographic Traveller and The Telegraph. He is also the Editor-in-Chief of the expert travel writing agency World Words. His London restaurant picks? Try the best of British at Alyn Williams' Michelin-starred diner (serving fine griddled Scottish lobster, English wood pigeon and Orkney scallops), go international at Italian diner Artusi (where the delectable homemade pasta is only bettered by the melt-in-your-mouth orange and almond cake) or get creative at The Clove Club (with a range of delicious oddities, such as tart of sheep's milk yoghurt, wood pigeon sausage with ketchup, and lemonade and black pepper ice cream).

**Alyn Williams at
The Westbury**
37 Conduit St
Mayfair
alynwilliams.com

Le Gavroche
43 Upper Brook Street
Mayfair
le-gavroche.co.uk

The River Café
Rainville Road
West
rivercafe.co.uk

**Dinner by Heston
Blumenthal**
Mandarin Oriental
Hyde Park
66 Knightsbridge
City, dinnerbyheston.com

Benares
12a Berkeley Square
House, Mayfair
benaresrestaurant.com

SushiSamba
110 Bishopsgate
City

The Ledbury
27 Ledbury Road
Notting Hill
theledbury.com

Sticks'n'Sushi
11 Henrietta Street
Covent Garden
sticksn sushi.com

Artusi
161 Bellenden Road,
Peckham
artusi.co.uk

Pollen Street Social
8-10 Pollen Street
Soho
pollenstreetsocial.com

St. John
26 St. John Street
Shoreditch
stjohnsgroup.uk.com

The Clove Club
380 Old St
Shoreditch
theloveclub.com