

Food



Revolution on a plate

Sated by a Michelin foodfest in London, **Rachael Oakes-Ash** says times really have changed.

There was a time when England and gourmet meant fish and chips served in brown bread, not white. Then some ingenious chef decided to add rock salt, another thought pesto and before you knew it, the British food scene had emerged from under the pile of suet fat where it had been hiding.

The British invented comfort food. It was all those dark, depressive years between world wars when bread and butter pudding and spotted dick were cheap alternatives.

"Cafs", like pubs, were found on every corner, with Formica tables and mammoth fry-ups with milky cups of tea. They're still there, only the pubs are now called gastro pubs with celebrity chefs in the kitchen and the cafs, like E Pellicci on Bethnal Green Road in Shoreditch, charge double for the privilege of eating pig fat.

The good British comfort fare still exists but it's now served on bone china in dining rooms of subdued hues, such as the Albemarle at Brown's Hotel in Mayfair where Dover sole, potted shrimps and chicken livers share the menu, or at St John's Restaurant in Clerkenwell. It specialises in "nose to tail dining" – if you have to ask you won't stomach it.

England's food scene really came of age when the Michelin star twinkled in the London streets. Long before Jamie Oliver made cooking cool for the working classes and Gordon Ramsay elevated himself to superstar status, there was the arrogant and controversial Marco Pierre White. The first British chef to earn three Michelin stars and the first to hand them back, his White restaurant was famous in the 1990s when he would throw out customers who were not to his liking.

Now London has numerous Michelin stars on offer, including one three-star under the Gordon Ramsay helm. The streets are lined with providers and the Borough Market is where those in the know purchase fresh produce formerly unheard of within these city walls.

Chefs the world over covet the Michelin star, awarded annually and published in the *Michelin Guide*, intended originally to promote car touring and first published in 1900 by Andre Michelin, a founding brother of the Michelin tyre company.

The trick with Michelin dining is to find a restaurant that serves Michelin-standard food in an atmosphere that makes one comfortable. Three-star restaurants are three stars for their level of service, the cut of their linen, the choice of their crockery and the standard of food. For me they can be too stiff and formal and leave me more worried about picking up the wrong fork than savouring the delights in front of me.

The one-star is where it's at, especially from a rising chef keen to secure a second. Most of these restaurants in London offer a good-value set lunch from about £25 (\$50) for three courses, or you can go the whole degustation dinner hog with matching wines for a bigger price tag.

Step into the park-side dining room of Foliage in London's Mandarin Oriental Hotel in Knightsbridge and smell the second Michelin star on the boil. Head chef Chris Staines has an



Pukka tucker ... (clockwise from top) Amaya Restaurant; Foliage at the Mandarin Oriental; roast beef at the Greenhouse; the Borough Market.

Photo: David Wroe

impeccable service team that borders on over-attentive. It's a good lunch destination for businessmen; come dinner it's strictly couples.

There's little distraction from the plate at hand, which transforms from foie gras with apple jelly to calf's head and lobster with beetroot cannelloni and a horseradish cream that lingers on the palate like a refund lover. It's a good start to my Michelin journey.

Amaya Restaurant, the one-star Indian treat in Motcomb Street, Knightsbridge, is a visual feast with the kitchen as the stage. Airs and graces are left at the door; it's like stepping into a Bollywood den of contemporary chic and broccoli to die for. Yes, broccoli. The broccoli with ginger yoghurt here is enough to make you eat your greens again and again and again.

If you're wise you'll hand over your decisions to your waiter and trust that what comes out on shared tasting plates will tease you with flavours straight from the Tandoor oven. Sigri coal flame and Tawa iron plate. The ambience is lively and fun with a mix of moneyed folk and media types.

Two down, two to go. Lunch time in the Mayfair district of London is a fine affair when contracts are secured and celebrations made. I had heard the buzz about Hibiscus and French chef Claude Bosi (who trained under Alain Ducasse) and the menu did not disappoint.

> TRIP NOTES

■ Foliage, the Mandarin Oriental hotel, Knightsbridge, see mandarinoriental.com/london/dining/Foliage. Four-course dinner from £60 (\$122).

■ Amaya Restaurant, Knightsbridge, see www.amaya.biz. Dinner for two about £65.

■ Hibiscus, Mayfair, see hibiscusrestaurant.co.uk. Three-course set lunch for £25.

■ The Greenhouse, Mayfair, see greenhouserestaurant.co.uk. Three-course set lunch for £29.

My ravioli of hen's egg yolk and smoked potato with Alba truffle and caramelised Cevennes onion is still sending me postcards one month on.

My Irish friend was delighted by the Scottish langoustine, Welsh lamb sweetmeats, Brittany veal sweetbreads and Loire Valley pike on offer.

The dining room was bright with wood panelling for warmth and the crowd was relaxed, smart but unpretentious, perfect

accompaniments for what was truly a delightful urban experience. I'm gushing, I know, but they must be doing something right as Michelin has since awarded Hibiscus a second star.

All good things must come to an end and the Greenhouse in a quiet Mayfair Mews was a fitting finale. This oasis of calm is set back from the road through a landscaped garden. Guests exhale upon arrival with a soothing decor of chartreuse greens, chocolate and creams.

The head chef, Frenchman Antonin Bonnet, is an exercise in meticulous dining. He doesn't play around with too-fancy sauces and cooks at low temperatures as he has nothing to hide. "We let the produce speak for itself," says Antonin.

Think candied beetroot, parsnip mousse, butter served on a slab of granite, black truffle and beetroot, heart-shaped leaves for decoration, sea bass with basil jelly, parsnip soufflé and a relaxed service with impeccable attention to detail.

Wine in any Michelin restaurant is a given and you can be guaranteed the sommelier is as proud of his cellar as the chef is of his cuisine. I trust the sommelier to choose wisely and on each of these occasions they were spot-on.

London, you've surprised me.

The writer was a guest of Visit Britain.