

A Short Guide To London Restaurants

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14th Edition Revised

July 2007

What follows was originally written in 1984 after a year's sabbatical in London. It has been revised every couple of years since then, reflecting our experience dining out several times a week during a sabbatical from August 1990 to August 1991, half a year in 1995, sabbaticals in 1997-98 and 2004-05, and numerous short visits. The basic organization of this guide is geographical. Some of the restaurants are new to this edition; others have been in since the original 1984 edition, and have been revisited with pleasure since then. We retain a few places we have not visited recently because friends have enjoyed them and *The Good Food Guide* continues to rate them highly.

If you look for an old favorite from our previous guides and no longer find it listed, it has probably perished. **Rodos** closed in the spring of 2003: second generation owners failed to keep it viable. **Poons** is no more. We still sigh over both those extinctions. Note that **Chez Nico** and **La Tante Claire** passed into memory when their chefs retired. Prices are given in current British pounds, the £ being worth roughly \$2.00 at the time of writing. London continues to be a fantastic place to eat out, but inflation and the bad exchange rate have made it less of a bargain. The best buy in London is still Indian food. If you are unfamiliar with this cuisine (and Indian menus can be dauntingly unhelpful), see the Appendix for some basic definitions and explanations.

The British recession of the early nineties fostered one nice bit of competition: really good "set lunches" (usually with 2-4 choices per course) at the best restaurants in town, including posh hotel restaurants, and such hotel restaurants are far more likely to be open on holidays and near-holidays like 24 December than are independent restaurants. £25-35 per head (plus wine and tip) is standard. Even if you are ordering à la carte, lunch is less expensive than supper at these top venues, and that gives you the rest of the day to digest.

If you want a truly fabulous meal to celebrate the highest achievement in your life so

far, we suggest Heston Blumenthal's **The Fat Duck** (45), an hour out of London in Bray (use the Maidenhead train station and a taxi from there). Don't spend your money here, though, unless you have eaten at numerous top restaurants; Blumenthal is playing postmodern games with the traditions, so you need to know the original tastes before you can fully appreciate his wit. For outstanding exemplars of the great tradition, Continental/French cuisine with occasional touches of fusion, consider **Gordon Ramsay** (32) [Gordon Ramsey himself now, alas, doing more TV and empire building than cooking, but still the *Good Food Guide's* highest-rated restaurant in London], Marcus Wareing's **Pétrus** (31), **Tom Aikens** (33), **The Capital Hotel** (35), **Pied à Terre** (5), and a welcome newcomer, **The Ledbury** (30), whose Aussie chef, Brett Graham, is as friendly and unpretentious as could be. For a super-bargain upper-end set lunch, try **Aubergine** (34). For a *lot* of excellent food at amazingly low prices by current London standards, try **The Gay Hussar** (14) on Greek Street in Soho, especially at lunch. We've been going there since 1973 and we love it.

If you want exciting food at very affordable prices, try **Sedir** (21—Turkish), **Ravi Shankar** (6—south Indian vegetarian). A pleasing addition to the middle-price scene is **Racine** (37), a good place to go before a performance at the Royal Court. **Don Fernando** (40) in Richmond continues to be a decent source for tapas before a show at the Orange Tree and Richmond now offers a fancier alternative in **Bacco** (41—Italian). Bacco has the virtue of being good enough to be special, but approachable enough that you can take ideas home to improve your own cooking. **Sagar** (42) offers excellent South Indian fare within walking distance of the theatres in Hammersmith. Decent early fare near Shaftesbury Avenue before the theatre is not so easy to come by since the demise of Poons and Rodos. Chinatown is the obvious answer, but we are currently without good recommendations for Chinese food. ECapital (which offered exciting Shanghai cuisine only a couple of blocks from the centre of the theatre district) has disappeared. New Mayflower on Shaftesbury Avenue has been well reported by published guides, but when we tried it in June 2007 we found the food merely adequate and were infuriated by their adding a concealed service charge and then trying to bully us into adding a second tip on top of the food and service charge. Recommendations welcome.

Some new places we have found or that are recommended by friends. For imaginative modern European food at relatively bargain rates, try **Arbutus** (15) on Frith Street in Soho (a tough area to get good food, let alone at decent prices). For innovative Thai, the published guides are high on **Nahm** (in the Halkin Hotel, SW1) with a warmly-recommended £47 set dinner. Among current Greek possibilities, **The Real Greek** (15 Hoxton Market, N1) seems the most interesting. Clem Hawes and Minnie Sinha (our Indian experts) give high marks to **Gopal's** (12 Bateman Street, W1) for Goan specialties, and to **Tamarind** (20 Queen Street, W1) for "celebratory meals" at about £40 per head. We have eaten twice at **Club Gascon** (24) and found it exciting: small portions with a lot of variety and a heavy emphasis on foie gras. For Turkish, we have been impressed by the original **Mangal Ockabasi** (25—a Greasy Spoon joint and a great bargain) and **Sedir** (21); **Cambio de Tercio** (38) for Spanish; **Zafferano** (39) for Italian; and **Providores** (10) for New Zealand fusion. **Reports and new recommendations from users of this guide are always welcome.**

I. BLOOMSBURY (within easy walking distance of the British Museum—though not The British Library)

(1) **Yo Sushi.** A chain with some 18 outlets in London. The one at 11-13 Bayley Street, Bedford Square (020-7636-0076) is handy for the British Museum and Senate House. Like Itsu (next entry) it is a conveyor-belt sushi house. Open noon to 11 p.m. Mon-Sat and almost as long on Sunday. You can spend a little or a lot, depending on what you choose and how much you eat. A good place for a quick meal pre-theatre.

(2) **Itsu.** 103 Wardour Street, W1 (020-7479-4790). A “conveyor-belt” sushi house, Tokyo style. There are a growing number of these in London: we’ve eaten several times in this one because it is convenient to the theatre district, open from noon to late, and not too crowded ca. 6 p.m. Decent sushi, made in sight and popped on the conveyer belt on different-colored plates that indicate price level. Their notion of “sushi” is pretty broad (e.g., Thai chicken salad), but the stuff is edible. Your bill is made up by totaling the plates that have accumulated where you sit. Beer and other drinks can be ordered or can be taken off a robot cart that circles the eating area. Easy to spend £25 a head or more, but a good way to get a quick, decent meal in the West End. Can get incredibly noisy later in the evening.

(3) **Wagamama.** 4a Streatham Street—off Tottenham Court Road, about a block from the British Museum. 020-7323-9223. One of about ten branches of a growing and popular chain. A Japanese mess-hall (no private tables; no reservations; when not jammed, they do try to leave some space on the benches between groups of diners). Open noon (Sundays 12:30) to late. They specialize in one-dish meals. Very good and very fast, and the cost is anything from £8-15 per head. They have become so popular that tables at supper are sometimes full before the posted opening times, so go early. Because lines can stretch out into the street, they do not encourage lingering, and conversation is virtually impossible because of the noise. The food and the reasonable prices are the reasons for eating here. Their formula has clearly pleased a growing audience. Food orders are passed on from waiters by hand-held computers; beer is available. Not great food, but decent ethnic food at a decent price, and quick if you don’t have to stand in line.

II. NORTH AND WEST OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM (but walkable from there if you like walking)

(4) **Chez Gerard.** 5 Charlotte Street W1 (020-7636-4975). A branch of a growing chain providing reliable French country bistro fare. Open Sunday, which can be useful in this area. Good steaks, steak tartare, and lambchops with rosemary. The onglet (a chewy but tasty steak) is an excellent buy at about £10—and what Rob almost always orders here. They do juicy poached salmon, too. Excellent pommes frites. The French fish

soup is the genuine article. Nothing special about the food, but it is legitimate of its type. Decent house wine. This is basically a French joint, conveniently located, and a decent buy at £25-30 a head. You can spend more, but don't need to.

(5) **Pied à Terre.** 34 Charlotte Street (020-7636-1178). This restaurant suffered a fire in the Autumn of 2004, and we have only been back twice since it reopened. We have long considered it one of the nicest places to eat in London. Now on its third chef (Shane Osborn) but still one of the top-rated restaurants in London. The Michelin guide gave it a star very early in its existence and subsequently raised it to two. Our first "cheap lunch" here in 1993 was so revelatory that we made this restaurant our big splurge in 1994, and loved every savourous minute. We also splurged on à la carte prices in 1995, and felt them more than justified. We have been back at least once most years since then, regularly taking epicure friends. Nibbles include very good bread and herbed olives. Starters over the years have included wild duck and celeriac; browned scallops on little individual beds of spinach surrounded by a puddle of ginger purée; teal with confit of turnip and foie gras; snails with morilles, giroles, asparagus, and garlic; panfried foie gras with creamed horseradish; and hot foie gras on endive in a honey sauce. This last was truly memorable: a goose liver of the consistency of the creme in creme brûlée (really melting) on slightly bitter endive leaves (cooked) with a greatly reduced sauce that just barely hinted at sweetness. Main dishes have included a sweetbreads and kidney dish; a langoustine, sea bass, and ginger dish; partridge with pear purée and celeriac; veal fillet with endive and wild mushroom; braised halibut fillet and queen scallops (with roe), oyster sauce, and cardamom; brill fillet with red wine sauce, aubergine purée and chopped aubergine (small dice, fried) and langoustines. The secondary seafood contrasted in texture and taste with the primary in the last two dishes. They like to do extras, such as providing everyone with a mini creme brûlée prior to dessert. Not really necessary, however delicious, since the desserts here are very good. We have tried chocolate marquise, pistachio glacé, caramelized pineapple with apple beignets, a pear and ginger tart with cinnamon ice cream, dark bitter chocolate pavé and soufflé accompanied with black cherry sorbet, and caramel choux with vanilla sauce. The front of house manager, proprietor David Moore, has been the one stable force. Chefs have changed twice (though without loss of quality). Some of their menus offer wine by the glass chosen to go with the food. That option is expensive, but with a good sommelier, is well worth the price. For the à la carte menu, expect to pay more than £75 a head, but that includes all the various drinks (sherry, wine, dessert wines, mineral water). Set lunch at around £25 for two courses has to be one of London's greatest bargains—but one can order à la carte at lunch here, and we almost always succumb to that temptation. The restaurant seats only 40-odd people: this is a cosy and unpretentious enterprise for a place that serves stellar food and wine.

A note of warning: our most recent visit (April 2007) was somewhat disappointing, and a couple of friends have had similar experiences recently. Nothing terribly wrong, but just not up to past standards. We hope this is a temporary aberration: reports welcome.

(6) **Ravi Shankar Bhel Poori House** 133-135 Drummond Street, just west of Euston Station (020-7388-6458). There are several Bhel Poori houses on this street, but contrary to *Time Out's* opinion we think this much the best. Service at any of them is iffy, but is usually better here than at the others. A fantastic bargain: **this is probably the cheapest first-rate simple dinner in London.** What they serve is basically Indian fast food or street food, all of it vegetarian. The dishes we get most often are Bhel Poori (always), Potato Poori or Panni Poori (the latter is pooris fried to puff up; you knock a small hole in the top and ladle in chickpeas in tamarind sauce and then stuff the whole ball into your mouth), Aloo Chana Chat (chickpeas and potatoes), and Dahi vada. Masala Dosa (lentil pancake stuffed with spiced potato) and Paper Dosa (a variant where the pancake is stiff and comes looking like a "his master's voice" trumpet) are both excellent. Good Brinjal Bhajee (eggplant). In January 2004 we tried a spinach and panir dosa and absolutely loved it. Excellent sweets: we always get a Gulab Jamun, a Shrikand, and a Badam Kulfi and share them around. Regrettably, the Kulfi is now westernized, more like ice cream. Very good lassi to drink, either sweet or salted. Beer and wine are available, but we don't care for wine with this food. Because this is close to Euston Square tube stop, you can get from an early meal here to the Barbican Center very quickly, a much better arrangement than trying to eat near that theatre-in-a-wasteland. Open right through the afternoon, so particularly convenient when getting to an early show. For three people, we generally pay about £30 total. If service is working, you can be in and out well fed in way less than an hour. Service is normally semi-efficient, if brusque and somewhat inattentive. Easy walking distance from the new British Library. If they are full, or you fancier hotter spicing (on average), try **Diwana Bhel Poori House** a few doors away at 121 Drummond Street. Seating is less comfortable, but it has at least as many partisans as Ravi Shankar.

(7) **Prezzo** 161 Euston Road NW1 (020-7387-5587). A couple of blocks west of the British Library on the other side of the road. Busy, noisy, quite decent modern Italian food of the pasta-pizza-salad sort. Culinarily a cut above the Pizza Express directly across the street from the British Library, though also a tad pricier. In a lousy neighborhood for food, Prezzo is about as good a place to do a business lunch as you will find. Too bad about the din, though arriving early or very late helps. Mains run £6-9. Prezzo has branches in Hertford Street and Kensington High Street.

(8) **Great Nepalese** 48 Eversholt Street NW1 (020-7388-6737). On the opposite side of Euston Station from **Ravi Shankar Bhel Poori House**, this is a place for lots of meat at low prices: mostly kebab styles. Chicken Tikka, mutton etc. Good chutneys and naans. Unprepossessing from the outside, but excellent, delicate cooking and very cheerful service. Nepalese is a first-cousin of Indian, and this place is a real bargain. You can eat a lot of good food for £25 a head, and set price meals are cheaper. The Zagat guide rates it highly for a restaurant in that price range, and the *Good Food Guide* lists it year after year. Only a few blocks from the new British Library. Open all week.

(9) **Villandry** (170 Great Portland Street, W1; 020-7631-3131). New to us in 1999 and holding up well when we visited it in June 2000 and again in 2001 and 2002—for

Sunday brunch. Susan Welch reported two excellent meals in the summer of 2003. Villandry is a fancy grocery store with a plain, cheerful, upscale British bistro attached to it. *Time Out* has reclassified it from French to modern-European, but we would say modern-eclectic. The menu is short and relatively simple, heavy on veggies. Nice soups and fancy greens salads; good fish dishes (e.g., tuna with grilled aubergine); nice cheeses. (For £30-35 a head you can get a simple, high-quality meal, though spending £20 more at dinner would be easy. A pleasant house wine is only £14. Good sweets. They do breakfast, brunch, lunch, and dinner. The area is otherwise something of a desert (we rented a flat across the street and stumbled onto it by accident). Definitely a nice place for a leisurely brunch; ought to be fine for dinner if you are not going on to the theatre—though it now opens at 6:00 for dinner. Gets noisy when full.

(10) **Providores** (109 Marylebone High Street, London, W1U 4RX, Telephone: 020 7935 6175). A New Zealand fusion restaurant, with lots of unusual combinations of flavors. It is VERY popular for Sunday brunch, with people waiting in line for the informal downstairs room. We had booked upstairs in the more formal location. Our starters were “sweet potato, paprika, field mushroom, and piquillo pepper tortilla (i.e., frittata) with avocado yogurt (wonderful) and greens;” “Grilled chorizo on herb-roasted sweet potato salad with watercress, soft boiled egg, and lemon-tomato salsa;” and “tea smoked salmon, two poached eggs and spinach on toasted walnut bread with yazu Hollandaise;” plus side orders of sauteed mushrooms and grilled smoked streaky bacon. We drank Marlborough Sauvignon blanc called Gravitass. Sweets were “baked quince and pomegranate molasses cheesecake with sesame shortbread and coconut sorbet,” “lime-leaf poached pear with guava sorbet ripple, ginger mascarpone, black cardamom syrup, and brandy snap,” and “sticky date and walnut pudding with orange tamarind toffee sauce, yorkshire rhubarb parfait and compote.” We had calvados, a Bepi Tosolini Grappa di moscato, and Limoncello, plus coffee. The frittata was the least interesting, though that avocado yogurt (whipped, like thick whipped cream or mayo) was excellent; the chorizo was splendid. Worth exploring further. We will go back for dinner. Expect to pay £50 a head, plus wine and service.

(11) **Matsuri High Holborn** (71 High Holborn WC1V 6EA, 020 7430 1970). A handsome, austere setting for unusual Japanese food. We got a seaweed salad (4 types of seaweed plus some salad greens); an assorted sashimi (including some mackerel that even Kit agreed was good, and she doesn't usually like mackerel), an assorted tempura, a grilled aubergine, pancake balls with octopus inside, eel tempura, a salmonskin roll, a salmon avocado roll, two pieces of toro, and a piece of surf-clam. We had with that a Chilean viognier and fizzy water, and finished with a dessert wine. We advise exploring their sashimi/sushi, as we found their raw fish the best part of the meal, but we had decided to be adventurous for a change and not always just get the usual things. Figure anything from £30-100 per head, depending on how you order.

(12) **Fino** (33 Charlotte Street, W1T 1RR, Tel: (020) 7813 8010). Upscale Spanish. Fino is a basement restaurant, very posh with lots of light wood. We went with Henry Horwitz and ordered tapas style and got 10 dishes for the four of us, which proved to be about

right. They included octopus in olive oil, crispy fried squid, queen scallops, tuna and guacamole, potatoes brava, jerusalem artichoke (very interesting, that, briefly sautéed with lots of rosemary and olive oil; it has inspired similar dishes at home), chorizo and tomato salad, red and green pepper salad, duck leg confit on celeriac puree. For dessert, Judy got a fig tatin (excellent) and we all shared a bottle of dessert wine. We had with the meal a Spanish Chardonnay (Otazu) and Sangria (the latter appallingly overpriced). One could pay anything from £30 to £70 per person here. If you don't mind traveling a fair way down Old Brompton Road, though, try **Cambio de Tercio** for a more formal and very fine, version of Spanish cuisine.

(13) **Bleeding Heart** (rather far from the others of this region, but near High Holborn; Bleeding Heart Yard, Greville Street, London, EC1N 8SJ Telephone: 020 7242 8238)., A three-part establishment of pub, brasserie, and gastronomic restaurant in Bleeding Heart Courtyard, near Hatton Street, London's diamond district. The courtyard is a lovely 19th century space, cobbled, narrow entrance—it could easily serve as a film set for some Dickens scene. The restaurant is in a basement on the far side. While it has a very good wine list, the food is moderately ambitious but less than perfectly executed. Flavors were too bland. We split three starters: caramelized tomato tart tatin with sheep ricotta; scottish scallops on the shell with caramelized onions; and cornish crab, fresh seaweed, and sweet mustard “sushi”. The mains were roast suckling pig done 4 ways, monkfish and lentils, sea bass with purple potatoes and other veggies. The suckling pig was a revelation; very fine grained meat and tiny rib bones; this was genuinely a suckling, and delicious. The restaurant has vineyards in New Zealand, so we explored their Trinity Hill Roussane 2002 (from Hawkes Bay region). We had never heard of Roussane, but the very French sommelier explained that in France the grape was mixed with others, never made up on its own. We found it very good with the food, though its range of flavor was narrow and in the lower middle range of possible flavors; no sparkling high points. We finished with a coconut pannacotta (too much gelatin) and a pinot de charentes dessert wine from Chateau de Beaulon (vielle reserve ruby)—a good wine, though too sweet for our taste. We especially enjoyed having been put in a place they obviously like for tables of 3, a tiny room just big enough to hold a table off the corner of the main room. It could be curtained off—there was a curtain. Very 18th century, this feature—just right for an assignation. The staff speak French among themselves but have plenty of English.

III. SOHO, COVENT GARDEN, AND PICCADILLY (basically south of Oxford Street and West of Kingsway)

(14) **The Gay Hussar** 2 Greek Street W1 (020-7437-0973). Hungarian and wonderful; a family favorite of ours since 1973. A reservation is usually essential. The restaurant is small (about 18 tables, including upstairs), and it has been a favorite hangout for Labour MPs and journalists since the 1940s. (Over the bar is a shelf of books written by past regulars.) The 3-course lunch is an especially good buy (£16.50-18.50 plus wine). Starters of particular note include cold sour cherry soup; Debrezen-style vegetable

salad, made from sweet peppers in a slightly sweet sauce; fish terrine. Main dishes we love include quenelles of carp, pink trout, roast duck, smoked goose with a baked bean dish, various goulash and dumpling dishes. Liver dishes are exceptional, if you like them. The Hungarian wines are good, and surprisingly cheap. The desserts are spectacular (if you can find room for them). Our favorites include wonderful poppyseed strudel, pureed chestnuts, and a splendid fruit pudding (which we can find no way to describe properly—Judy insisted we try it, and she was right). Finish with coffee or decaf, and some of their fruit eau de vies—Barask (apricot), Kirsch (cherry), pear and the like, and try a central European herbal drink; the one they had was Unicum (We liked the Czech Becherovka better, but this was interesting). The last time we went, in the Fall of 2004, we found a superb bargain wine, a Hungarian pinot noir labelled Tibor Gal 2002. Another Tibor Gal red also was highly recommended on the list. That is definitely a label to look for. One of the waiters, whom we remember as a beginner in the early 80s, is now quite senior, and in 2004 he recognized us instantly and welcomed us though we had not been back for several years. Thanks to the change of management, they now take credit cards; luckily the new management has not caused any diminution in quality, though the menu is slightly simpler than it used to be. Outstanding food—Central European comfort food—and excellent service. We book for lunch and eat ourselves silly, then wander out, see a museum or feed ducks in St James's Park, and then go to a long opera that starts early (we went there before a 4:30 pm *Götterdämmerung* at Covent Garden). You don't need any further food after such a lunch. Supper is even more gigantic than lunch, and more expensive (£30-50 per head). We find it difficult to eat that much food, however delicious, especially at night. On our most recent visit (April 2007) we found the place as good as ever.

(15) **Arbutus**. 63 Frith Street, W1. 020-7734-4545. Only open a couple of years, and definitely a splendid addition to Soho eateries. *Time Out's* 2006 "Best New Restaurant" winner, and deservedly so. "Modern European" cuisine of a light, imaginative sort. Cheerful, informal, very professional service and a nice ambiance. Starters we particularly enjoyed were "Pigs head with salad greens and caramalized onions" and Eel with beetroot and horseradish cram with salad greens. Mains that much appealed were Lamb sweetbreads with winter veggie puree and a duck and greens dish. A desert that lingers in memory was rhubarb and blood orange sections with blood orange sorbet—the most delectate and delicious rhubarb we have ever encountered (definitely harvested long before maturity). They do a set lunch for about £15 and they have excellent wines at exceptionally low markups. They do circa 60 wines as 250 ml carafes as well as bottles, which is welcome. Even à la carte, Arbutus is no more than two-thirds the price of very ordinary restaurants, and its cooking is way above ordinary standards.

(16) **Sofra**. 36 Tavistock Street in Covent Garden (020-7240-3773). Other branches exist, including one at 18 Shepherd Street in Shepherd's Market and another on St Christopher's Place (just off Oxford Street). A decent Turkish restaurant, this branch of Sofra occupies the building in which DeQuincy wrote *Confessions of an Opium Eater*. It is open 365 days of the year, noon to midnight, so if you want a meal on a Sunday, a

Bank Holiday, or late in the afternoon before an early show—no problem; you can find one in this convenient location. We have taken advantage of this many times. Their fixed meze, called the “healthy lunch/supper” is a bargain. Some other dishes that seemed above average were fried squid, Albanian liver, kisir (a kind of tabouleh with tomato sauce), taramasalata, and manca (spinach and yogurt). We have found their fish overcooked. The sweets trolley includes lots of kinds of baklava as well as fruits, and cake-and-syrup dishes. House red and white are both respectable. A vegetarian can find lots to eat here. The fixed meze is about £8 per head; ordering lavishly à la carte, we have spent £25-30, including wine, mineral water, and sweet. The room has no soundproofing, so is noisy when tables are full. In our experience, the starters are more interesting than the main dishes, but then we consider that the case for all the eastern Mediterranean cuisines. We have not been back recently: friends have reported very mixed luck of late here, but *The Good Food Guide* continues to list it.

(17) **Brasserie Roux**, 8 Pall Mall SW1; 020-7968-2900—basically at the bottom of Haymarket, an easy 10-minute walk from Shaftesbury Avenue theatres. Opened two years ago, it occupies an old bank building by the Sofitel St. James Hotel but with its own entrance. A fine space with high ceilings and an air of calm. The menu was created by *the* Albert Roux, but this is a posh brasserie, not a gastronomic temple. Rob had a divinely-cooked piece of veal liver (ultra rare); the good French wine was under £20; the service was young, cheerful, very French, and highly efficient. Pre-theatre special dinner was £15. A good place for veal kidneys, pig’s trotter, or a wide array of fancy French salads. A three-course dinner with two glasses of wine is priced at about £25.

(18) **Belgo Centraal** (50 Earlham Street in Covent Garden, right across the street from the Donmar Warehouse Theatre; 020-7813-2233.) It specializes in mussels: tons of them each week—literally. They fix the mussels in various ways; we liked the version in coconut milk with lemon grass and the “snob” version in brandy and lobster sauce. They offer a few other dishes (e.g., wild boar sausage), but it helps to like shellfish. Their frites are as good as we’ve ever eaten. The great treat here is the list of 50 or so Belgian beers. Some are fruit beers and taste like plum-and-champagne—delicious but no hoppy beer taste. They have dark, light, high and low alcohol, spicy, musky, dank, lemony, fruity—you name it. Best to go in a party of four or more, order as varied a set of beers as you can contrive, and circulate them throughout the meal. Then top off with some dessert beers. The decor is blond wood, lots of silvery ventilation ducts and stainless surfaces, and a view into the kitchen. Staff dress in monks’ robes, apparently reflecting the monastic origins of some of the strongest beers. They want fast turnover; if you book, you will be given a time by which you must be finished. Not a place to linger and talk (it’s noisy), but a wonderful place for a bibulous snack or light meal. Considering the quality and unusual nature of the offerings, this is quite a bargain. You can eat here for £12-20 per head, and it would be difficult to spend more than £30 unless you can hold an awful lot of beer or opt for wine (which would be silly). Belgo is famed for long lines and noise, but we have almost always been able to walk in if we get there early on our way to a play.

IV. ISLINGTON and areas walkable from there, both toward the City and toward Hackney (North and East of the British Library; on and off we have lived more than two and a half years in this region, so some of these are neighborhood joints, but some are worth a trek from other parts, and some are handy for theatres: the Almeida, Sadler's Wells, the Arcola, and even the Barbican. (To get to the Barbican from the Angel region, take a 4 or a 56 bus—it's about 10 minutes.

(19) **Iznik**. 19 Highbury Park (020-7354-5697). A #19 bus will drop you right in front of this pleasant, unpretentious, and very authentic-seeming little Turkish restaurant. We do not pay much attention to decor, but felt that this assemblage of wall ornaments and dangling lamps had been put together with love, and all the bangles are kept beautifully dusted. The menu features bakes and stews more than kebab, which is a nice change. Dishes we liked included tarama salata (made with SMOKED roe); ispanak tarator (coarse spinach with lots of drained yogurt and garlic); dolma; kisir; karnibahar kizartma (cauliflower dipped in an egg and garlic batter and fried, served with a carrot and yogurt sauce—excellent); peynirli borek (feta and herbs in phyllo cigars); and patates koftesi (fried balls of mashed potato). In addition to baklava, sweets included a compote made from dried fruit and walnuts, and a bramble mousse. The house red was fine; ayran is a yogurt drink with salt and thyme in it, and this was nice and thick. Though out of the way (unless you're an Arsenal fan), this is definitely worth a visit, and you can have a splendid meal for £25 a head.

(20) **Gallipoli** (020-7359-0630). 102 Upper Street (with two branches in the next two blocks up Upper Street, **Gallipoli II** and **Gallipoli Again**). This started very promisingly, but as of 2005 we felt the quality was falling off, though it is still a good value for money. At its best, you can get excellent mussels, hummos, eggplant dishes, and all the old favorites. Note: we find the deep fried squid disappointing and don't order it. Good cheap house wine (£12). Hard to spend more than £20 a head if you are sharing a bunch of starters. Hummus is good, as are avocado tarama, and the various patlican dishes. (The patlican salatasi—a smoked eggplant purée is spectacular.) The yogurtlu ispanek (a spicy yogurt and spinach dish) pleased us quite a lot. We are not as happy with the fried kalamari, which seems limp and overbattered to us. Aubergine and spinach dishes are yummy. The **stuffed apricot sweet** is spectacular and not to be missed if you like apricots. Wildly crowded by mid-evening, but possible to walk into at lunch or for an early dinner. Totally unpretentious: looks like a mere caf and some of the tables are only semi-private. A great place to eat before a show in the wastelands of the Barbican: cross the street, go back to Angel tube stop, and get a 56 bus right to the edge of the Barbican Centre.

(21) **Sedir** (4 Theberton Street, N1 0QX; phone: 020 7226 5489). Recommended by Paul Cannan and rightly so. We had Yogurtly Kizartma, a dish of aubergines, courgettes, tomatoes, onions, and at the other end of the plate is a dollop of yogurt. Their fried kalamari were excellent, though we must remember to say no to the tartar sauce. Felafel with tahini sauce was fine. Hellim was what we know as Halloumi—fried

cheese. Mucver was new to us, and outstanding; a courgette-egg frittata or deep-fried patty, with a sauce of raw veggies and cracked wheat (we think). Patlican salata (aubergine in yogurt), dolma, and borek—fried phyllo triangles with spinach inside—were superb. Rob felt that the borek was the best he had ever eaten: it can be soggy and dull, or oily: this was light with very delicate, precise flavors, cooked just right. We had a bottle of turkish white, and desserts included excellent baklava, lemon sorbet served in a frozen lemon skin, and a pear, cream, and cinnamon dish. We don't know how their mains would be (having dined, as usual in such places, off self-selected meze), but this really is a super restaurant, and not at all expensive: you could eat very well for £20 a head all in. The menu is limited enough that our second meal there virtually duplicated the first, so one would not wish to go too often.

(22) **Metrogusto** (11- 13 Theberton Street N1 0QY, tel: 020 7226 9400—just across from **Sedir**). This is a little Italian restaurant with some real virtues in the food and wine offset by sloppy service. The first time we tried Guinea fowl, swordfish, and home-made sausage. A chocolate pudding and plum/armagnac ice cream, and a panna cotta with candied limes were among the sweets. We had a fine San Gimignano wine. The second time, four of us went, and we shared our starters: Salad of grilled pears, rucola, and pecorino; little squid stuffed with polenta with a piquant sauce; house paté with corn mash and caramelized shallots. The main dishes were catch of the day (halibut), Butcher's cut (pork tenderloin with fried veggies and potatoes), and very rare tuna. We had one tiramisu and tried two dessert wines, a Moscato Dindarello and a Passito di Pantelleria. The moscato was distinctly lighter. Our wine with the main dishes was a Falangina Sannio Beneventano, Sorbo Serpico (region) feudi di S Gregorio (vinyard), the same region and vinyard that produced the good Greco di Tufo we liked there before.

(23) **The Real Greek Souvlaki and Bar** (140-142 St John Street, EC1V 4UA; phone: 020 7253 7234) is a ten or fifteen minute walk from Angel or an easy ride by 56 bus. Its interior is all stainless, with chains hanging down to make screens. Kitchen visible. Noisy music, alas. Mostly they have long tables, and you squash in with others, but they have some tables for two, and put two of them together for the three of us since we got there very early. We tried a meze supper: taramasalata (a bit salty and creamy), melizzanosalata (excellent fine-chopped eggplant salad), Htiropiti (we think we have that right), a mix of feta and sweet peppers and other herbs; plakates gigantes—broad beans in a tomato sauce; octopus; a single souvlaki; and a dish of horta—a hot greens salad. The horta may have been the prize of the show—wonderful shredded greens (spinach, cabbage?, onions?, beets—we're really not sure what all went in except for the beetgreens, which did not overpower it). They had been sauteed and had salad dressing. We were pleased enough with the results to resolve to try the other two branches. One specializes in mezes only (and is reputed, alas, to be VERY loud). The other is a fancier, sit-down restaurant, with higher prices to match. Both of the others are in Hoxton market. This meal was not cheap, given that we had a bottle of Notios white wine and 3 Metaxa 5 star brandies plus loukoumia (turkish delight, though not so termed in Greek restaurants) plus a yogurt, honey, and walnuts dessert. The Barbican

would be an easy walk from here. Expect to spend £30-50 per head, depending on how you order.

(24) **Club Gascon** (57 West Smithfield EC1A 9DS, phone: 020 7796 0600) gets loud cheers from us all and strong recommendations. The room was elegant and unusual. The walls (from some previous inhabitant of the building) were a cream and brown marble with reddish elements. The tablecloths were café au lait colored, and the chargers and bits of trim were dark brown. For serving plates, they used slates and wood as well as china. The Gascony region specializes in **foie gras**, and the restaurant did too. You could get a tasters' menu, but the alternative were lots of small dishes divided into five categories: one was route du sel (why salt, we're not sure); veggie dishes, foie gras dishes, fish dishes, and meat dishes. We ordered two of the salt, two veggie, three fois gras, and three fish. We also had desserts, two bottles of wine, and fizzy water. They brought us a palate cleanser of a pumpkin froth and little sticks sliced from a crepe made somehow with blood/black pudding and then dried to crispiness. The two starters we chose were a home-smoked salmon with pine nuts and an herb granité—a basil and mint mix in the ice crystals that went well with the salmon. The other was crispy and smooth suckling pig with mustard ice cream and purslane. The pig seemed to be three paper-thin slices of something more like head-cheese made of suckling pig, and the skin appeared as squares about 1 inch square (not really skin but the outside of the fat) and then some crackling skin sliced into ribbons. The purslane bits were mixed with a similar green leaf (maché), with a mild cream dressing. The mustard ice cream was just a small spoonful: we would have made it stronger on the mustard flavor. The veggie dishes were a casserole of girolle mushrooms and green beans with some fresh almonds, and an artichoke heart topped with parsnip puree, and on top of that a pile of paper-thin parsnip slices treated like potato chips—baked crispy (though not salted). A bit of truffle vinaigrette was on the soft veggies. The foie gras dishes were (1) “lemon-lemon”—i.e. a deep reduction with some lemon in it with 4 small lumps of foie, plus a lemon granité; (2) a version with slices of foie, a sauce involving morrel mushrooms, and a glass of a 10 year old very dark brown sherry, and (3) the special Gascon terrine of foie gras, which was cold and buttery. The fish dishes were grilled scallops with salmon roe in a frothy white sauce and a bit of coral (Rob and Judy were in ecstasies over the roe in sauce); roasted baby squids in black sauce (ink) and lemon fennel (which we think was the orangy sauce); and we were supposed to have freshly smoked sturgeon, but the waitress's English was not perfect and she misheard the similar vowels in turbot and brought the turbot and mushroom dish, but it was so fantastically good (Kit says maybe the best mushrooms she's ever had) that we was more than happy with the inadvertent substitution. Rob felt that the use of the caviare in the scallop dish was the best he had ever encountered in a cooked dish. We started with a wine from Tarsan (we think the name was; we had never heard of the region); that was a bit disappointing, but the next, a Jurançon, was excellent. The sweets were as follows. A sweet made of foie gras (!) with crystalized angel hair and truffles; a chocolate rod that involved chocolate and violets, crunchy praline, coffee sauce, and a little glass of violet tea; and cherries that had been smoked (again!) and flambéed, their seeds removed and fresh almonds inserted. You picked them up by their stems to eat

them. With them was port juice and lemon chantilly. They were served in an odd dish that looked like an egg-container except for cherry-sized eggs. We rarely pay much attention to ambiance, but really liked the color scheme here, and enjoyed the wooden screens that seem to have been made from amazingly large trees—I'm not sure whether teak or mahogany. We have found ourselves disagreeing fairly strongly with the ratings in the newest *Good Food Guide*; they put Club Gascon considerably lower than we would (only a "5"), and give higher ratings to places we consider uninteresting and insipid. By our reckoning this is a restaurant well worth returning to. Smithfield Market is within sight, and the Barbican is an easy stroll—though this is not a place one could eat pre-theatre. Depending on how you order, an à la carte meal could come to almost anything, but there is a 5-course set meal for about £40 (£60 with wine). Individual dishes are priced from £8 to £20. *Time Out* calls Club Gascon "one of London's consistently great restaurants" and we agree.

(25) **Mangal Ockabasi** (two branches: **Mangal Ockabasi** 10 Arcola Street, E8 2DJ, Tel: 020 7275 8981; **Mangal II**, 4 Stoke Newington Road, N16 8BH, tel: 020 7254 7888; the Upper Street branch in Islington closed). Another Paul Cannan recommendation, seconded by Henry Horwitz. The original restaurant is an experience. No menu, bring your own bottle, and point at what you want. The restaurant is a Turkish grill—a 10 foot long countertop-high trough with charcoal (large chunk—pieces quart sized) with a huge vent fan over it. They usually have had 8 or 10 different things one can have grilled. Basically, you point at what you want, though you can consult a plastic menu in the window that probably comes from another restaurant. They've got what they've got (and not a lot of English). We had lamb cubes, a chicken and spices mix, and a mixed grill with various forms of lamb, including some of the best we've tasted. A friend of a friend reportedly abandons her vegetarian principles at that restaurant to eat the lamb, it is so good. The other version is an upmarket relative with starters and tablecloths, menus and a wine list. We had kalamar, spinach and yogurt, feta cheese in phyllo deep fried, jajik (the yogurt and cucumber dish), grilled lambs' kidneys, a large chopped aubergine salad, with a Turkish white wine, a single order of baklava and some brandy. The grilled meats are the specialty; go for those and rejoice. Main dishes are mostly £7-8 for a *lot* of meat and a large heap of varied, imaginative, delicious salad. Both are amazing BARGAINS for London, especially the original venue on Arcola Street. You might want to leave your valuables and credit cards at home when venturing there, but do venture. Although the area looks sufficiently poor that it might be dangerous, we have in fact not run into any trouble. We now go to the Arcola branch every time we visit the Arcola Theatre, which is now one of the best fringe venues in London.

(26) **Flâneur** (41 Farringdon Road, EC1M 3JB, Tel: (0)20 7404 4422)

Imagine a large, very high warehouse room, roughly square. At least 50 feet on a side, maybe more. Floor to at least 15 feet up are golden wooden shelves covered with gourmet foods—basically long shelf-life items dried, pickled, canned, etc. Various counters make available olives, cheeses, salumiere, and some precooked foods. One item Kit noted that amused and startled her: chocolate is going single malt or wine in

marketing conception. Vahrona chocolate has available in Europe “vintage” chocolates. Three bars carried the estate and country from which the beans came plus the harvest year!!! Also, Flâneur’s has a small vegetable and fruit area. And in the back are a number of golden wood tables and chairs. Who needs restaurant décor when you can be surrounded by shelves of fancy foods and lovely wood? We started with beetroot soup with crème fraiche, a charcuterie plate that had cebezada, chorizo, prosciutto, morcon, and salchichon—the latter being (we think) the almost marble-sized capers on stems. We followed these with Pan fried squid with chorizo, chilli jam, rocket, and lemon; seared foie gras with fig and port jam and sourdough toast; and chargrilled tuna with tabouleh, oven dried tomatoes, and tapenade. Each of these was done superbly. The tuna was rare, just browned on the outside a bit, the foie gras was wonderful on a partly whole wheat sourdough with lovely crust, and the squid dish had interesting contrasting flavors with that chilli jam—sweet but also hot. We overreached perhaps in having desserts too, but we were curious to see what the chef could do. They were disappointing by comparison, but okay in their way. Dark chocolate tart with crystallized ginger, lemon ricotta cheesecake (really disappointing), and poached pears with mixed berry compote. We drank an André Thomas Gewurtztraminer and fizzy water. Decaf cappucini with the desserts. To help balance the effect, we walked all the way home, a couple of miles. The weather was warm and dry, so it was a pleasant stroll. We also bought some food. A subsequent jaunt for food stuffs proved interesting. Early afternoon (British lunch time) every aisle of the room was crammed with tables and chairs, and local business people were lunching elegantly. Shopping was impossible; one couldn’t lean over a table between two heads to look at the chocolate. If you’re shopping, do not go during mealtime.

V. CLOSE TO KENSINGTON GARDENS AND HYDE PARK: WEST, NORTH, EAST

(27) **Clarke’s**. 124 Kensington Church Street, W8 (020-7221-9225). Sally Clarke is not only a fine chef (who trained at Chez Panisse), but a good manager. The restaurant specializes in absolutely fresh ingredients, and for many years offered only one set meal at supper, though they have modified this austere pattern of late. Without having to produce lots of variety, they can concentrate on making a superlative meal. We started one such meal with guinea-fowl and pumpkin ravioli served over pumpkin soup with shavings of parmesan cheese. The pumpkin soup was interesting because it was not the usual cinnamon-clove-allspice flavoring, but mostly coriander and fresh cilantro. The shavings were actually thin, crumbly slices, and provided a grainy, salty counterpoint to the slightly bland pumpkin. Then came a thick fillet of halibut chargrilled with roasted red pepper mayonnaise topped with slices of roasted red pepper, and autumn vegetables with wild rice. Wild rice (California style) was “undercooked” by our standards, so rather crunchy and a nice texture contrast. The veges were miniscule carrots and scallions and bits of kale and cabbage and broccoli. Then pieces of Lancashire and Wealdon Round cheeses with grapes and oatmeal biscuits; followed by

apple, date, and lemon strudel served with lemon ice cream. Then decaf and a chocolate truffle. We had a nice Muscadet and Sevres white wine with it. All the courses included contrasting flavors.

We vividly remember a fabulous starter from some years back: buckwheat blini with smoked salmon and haddock, with sour cream, red onion, capers, chopped nut, and dill, with olive oil sprinkled on top. Those capers belonged to a realm not hitherto experienced by us. Large, their interior parts distinct and not mushy, and still on their stems. The blini were tender and airy, the salmon was probably the best smoked salmon we have ever had, and the smoked haddock was a revelation—white, succulent, and delicate. (One does so enjoy a meal in which there is A REVELATION!) With that we were sipping our dry sherry. We have since tried to replicate the dish several times, always unsuccessfully but with pleasure. The main dish was boned loin of lamb, marinated and grilled, topped with chopped black olives and parsley, and accompanied by a parchment package holding small potatoes, field mushrooms, and something that might have been a bit of fennel or onion or shallot. We opted for an Italian red that would be light enough not to overpower the lamb, and what we got was excellent. Then slices of two delicious cheeses with oat biscuits and a slice of apple and a dressed bit of celery green. Then a hot chocolate and chestnut torte (gooey semisweet chocolate; by far the best chocolate we'd had in a restaurant in some time). We finished up with three dessert wines by the glass, a Jurançon that was fresher and less musky than the other Jurançon we've tasted, a vin santo, and a late harvest semillion that had a very sauterne-like sweetness and complexity.

At lunch, they offer a choice of three possible meals, somewhat less elaborate than dinner. Lunch will come to about £35; dinner is £49.50 plus wine. NB. Next door, during the day, Clarke's sells its wonderful bread, and very fancy olive oils. We don't go often because we like to get different things and share, but this is a very fine place to go if you fancy keeping your meal to yourself.

(28) **Nobu.** Metropolitan Hotel, 19 Old Park Lane, W1. 020-7447-4749. We are suspicious of international jet-setters' hot-spots, and Nobu (with an Antarctic location probably soon to open) is very much that sort of place, with a terrible reputation for being difficult to book and unpleasant in its service. Nonetheless, all such warnings in food guides and newspaper reviews notwithstanding, the descriptions of food are such that we decided to give it a try. Perhaps we were just lucky, but we were graciously treated when we called to make reservations and we had cheerful, competent, helpful service. The food is variously described as "Japanese," "fusion," and "odd." They do a £70 multi-course omakase meal (Tokyo style) which we suspect would be excellent and worth the money. We chose to order à la carte. We had first-rate toro tartare with caviar; scollop sashimi (excellent); spinach salad with whitefish (good, but not exceptional); salmon Peruvian-style on a skewer (quite good); rock-shrimp tempura with a creamy spicy sauce (outstanding); squid tempura (fine); and some freshwater eel sushi and a yellowtail cut roll (both super). The mingling of Japanese and South American flavors was sometimes extremely interesting. *The Good Food Guide* rates the cooking "6" (in part, we assume, simply for the superior quality of fish) and gives a price range of £32-£110. We paid about £60 a head for a splendid meal with an extremely nice Vouvray at

£34. House wines are about £25. Nobu does exceptionally good sushi/sashimi, but it is far from being just an upper-end Japanese restaurant. Worth a visit if you like fish.

(29) **Maroush III**. 62 Seymour Street, W1 (020-7724-5024). Lebanese. There are five Maroushes, three of them in close to Marble Arch, plus Maroush Gardens (the current favorite of *Time Out*.) They have changed hardly at all in the last fifteen years: standard middle-eastern fare but very fresh and large portions. We have had several excellent meals here. As usual with Eastern Mediterranean cuisines, we prefer just to order lots of starters. Dishes we enjoy include grilled eggplant with garlic and lemon, Tabbouleh (very light and minty), Hommos (superb), Basturma (smoked beef), a dish of zucchini, eggplant, new potatoes, and cauliflower, various spicy sausage dishes, Foul Moudamas (broad beans in lemon, oil, and garlic), Kibbeh Naya—raw meat with pine nuts etc, sweetbreads. House red and white are both fine, but not cheap: alcohol is very pricey here. If you order dessert, they bring a huge platter of various Baklava pastries, and you take as many as you like. Turkish coffee and espresso are good. There is a cover charge, but you do get a very good platter of ultra-fresh raw veggies to start with for that. For an all-stops-out meal of starters, £40+ per head and well worth it. You could spend a **lot** more getting main dishes (mostly grilled meat). The main dishes are good (to judge from those we have tried), but the variety of the starters is irresistible. A great place to take friends who like to share dishes.

(30) **The Ledbury**, 127 Ledbury Road W11 2AQ (Westbourne Park Tube, or Notting Hill Gate) 7792-9090, Chef: Brett Graham. This is now one of the best restaurants in London, and at lunch it is easy to get into. Of upper-end restaurants, the experience of a fancy lunch may be nicest at the Ledbury. Wareing's hotel-based restaurants have been very formal (he's shooting for more Michelin stars), and Tom Aikens' administration is marred by his ferocious personality, but Graham is so welcoming that when we talked to this friendly Australian, he was willing to give us a recipe of something we particularly liked—and wrote it out by hand. The restaurant is in a residential wasteland in a tastefully done-over pub space, graciously rather than austere formal. Chairs were comfortable and tables reasonably well distanced. We went all-out and did the tasting menu of six courses, very small helpings, spread out over time (£60 per head, and if you do the tasting menu, everyone at the table must do it; the matched wines were £40 per person).

We did the tasting menu with matched wines in January 2007 and were absolutely delighted. They started us with an amuse-bouche, what we would call foie gras toothpaste (a creamy version squeezed from a tube) on a single piece of herbed phyllo (slightly thicker than commercial phyllo, so possibly hand-made), with cress sprouts and a spicy salt. Served with that was sherry, Pado Cortado, Almacenista Emilio Lustau; it was from the coast, and had that slight salt tang and dark, slightly bitter flavor that contrasted nicely with the food.

Then came a beautiful loin of Tuna, raw but for the outer 1/16 inch, wrapped in basil, laid on a smear of basil paste, with a small salad of radish and soy to one side. The

tuna was sushi-grade, and a superb combination with basil. Tuna doesn't get better than that. With that came a 1998 Riesling, Schwartzhofberger Kabinett, Egon Müller.

The next little dish consisted of two goat-cheese tortelloni placed on a date purée, with wood sorrel and almonds (finely chopped—more like toasty crumbs). That purée is something we want to explore, since we buy good medjool dates, and they might contribute to something of the sort. One would have to use just a small amount, or it could be overpowering. This bit of sweet nicely balanced the goat cheese. The chosen wine was 2001 Marimar Pinot Noir, Dom Miguel Vineyard, Russian River. White would also have been possible, but they wanted a change of pace between the other whites.

That course was followed by roast foie gras with baked beetroot, apple purée, pain d'épice, and sesame; I found the beet preparation a trace sweet, and might have opted for a plainer rendition so as to get some of the potential bitter flavor for contrast. The foie gras, as usual, was meltingly rich, the apple flavor very pure and piercing, and the pain d'épice (a wafer thin slice) offered muskier-flavored spices for contrast. With the foie gras, they served the traditional sauternes, 1998 Chateau Climens.

The lighter fish course following consisted of a small piece of John Dory with a tiger prawn, a piece of pumpkin gnocchi with some seaweed-like black fungi on top, and a ginger froth. The pumpkin-fungus combination was superb. Judy liked the ginger spume. This received a 2004 Saumur Blanc, Arcane, Chateau de Fosse Seche.

The final main course was a medallion of beef filet (extremely rare, at our request), with smoked bone marrow (a couple of large pieces that came from we know not what huge bones), a baked potato (two or two and a half inches long, less than an inch wide) stuffed with chopped girolles. The red for this was chosen not to be too assertive: 2001 Côtes du Rhone Villages, cuvée des Galettes Les Aphillantes.

The amuse-bouche for pre-dessert consisted of a lemongrass gel, tiny chunks of pineapple (eighth-inch square at most), and then a coconut foam on top; this was served in a tall, narrow liqueur glass that you scraped out with a coffee spoon. Since lemongrass and coconut are favorite flavors for us, separate and combined, this light, subtle palate cleanser was very exciting, and we oohed and ahed so much we must have sounded like a basket full of puppies. The sommelier did not note down for us what she served with that, but I think we disappointed her, since we were so excited by the lemongrass that we didn't really take in the wine.

The dessert itself was perhaps the best-chosen display we have ever had because it did not overpower you with sweetness. Each item had a bitter element. There was a chicory crème brulée (about two and a half inches across), a small elongated-football-shaped scoop of transcendently smooth, crisp, cleansing coffee ice cream, and a bitter chocolate madeleine. With it was a 2004 Schwabe Trockenbeerenauslese, Umathum (from Frauenkirchen, Austria). We finished with coffee and petit fours.

We thought the tasting menu at The Ledbury was better than the one at Tom Aikens when we tried both in the same week in January 2007: Aikens' cooking is "fancier," but the overall shape and balance of Brett Graham's menu made for a more satisfying experience. Three recent meals at The Ledbury have all been spectacular, and it has become one of our great favorites. Long may it flourish.

VI. SOUTH OF HYDE PARK AND KENSINGTON GARDENS

(31) **Pétrus**. This superb restaurant has moved twice, and now resides in The Berkeley Hotel, Wilton Place SW1 (near Knightsbridge tube stop). 020-7235-1200), a hotel so exclusive that it does not show its name on the marquee; you simply have to *know*. It is aiming, *Time Out* says, at adding a third Michelin star. Chef Marcus Wareing was Gordon Ramsay's second back in their days at Aubergine, and Pétrus is part of Ramsay's restaurant empire, so don't go to **Pétrus** and **Gordon Ramsay** in the same week or even month; their cuisines are too close, and should be savored separately. The atmosphere is set by the red-wine colored drapery, and everything is luxurious, with superlative service and the tables well separated. One of our meals started with a salad of pan fried sweetbreads with pickled vegetables, new potatoes and soya vinaigrette; a Ballotine of confit foie gras with celeriac and apple salad, baby artichokes, sliced truffle, and cream vinaigrette; and sautéed scallops with tortellini of leek and onion, ginger, and horseradish cream. The main dishes included Roasted sea bass with sautéed artichokes, asparagus, lemon confit, and vanilla sauce; Braised halibut served with caramelized orange chicory, sautéed girolles, and sauternes sauce; and Breast of Gressingham duck with choucroute, braised root vegetable, and duck juice. With this we chose a Gewürztraminer from Lucien Albrecht, a lighter-flavored wine than our usual Trimbach, but exceptionally good with the various dishes. The sommelier was very helpful. For sweets, we had a platter of sorbets (raspberry, mango, green apple, and lemon); and an assiette of desserts made with passion fruit, including a passion fruit custard pie (very fine flavor), a concentrated syrup, and fruit layered with chocolate. The final dish was a raspberry soufflé with chocolate sauce. In December 2004, we had the following: Starters consisted of Oyster and scallop ceviche with a salad of red and yellow chicory, olive oil and lime juice dressing, and caviar; a trio of foie gras served on a Sauternes jellied plate with macerated figs in a spice wine and quince purée; and Sautéed Scottish scallops with roasted boudin noir, creamed potato, fried shallot rings, and baby capers, sauce diable. The mains were roasted seasonal loin of venison with braised game faggot, Belgian endive, sautéed sugar snap peas, venison raspberry jus (superb venison); Anjou pigeon poached and pan fried, on a liver and truffle crouton, confit leg with garlic, red wine shallots, pigeon sauce; and braised lamb heart with a red wine onion and sage farce, pickled white cabbage with glazed carrots, Alsace bacon and a truffled pomme purée. With the starters we had a half bottle of Menetou Salon, and with the mains we had a very good NZ red, Peregrine Pinot Noir, Central Otago 2002; we recommend that wine highly. After that we had a superb dessert wine, Cuvé Thibault 2001 Domaine Bellegarde Jurançon. A very good upper-end restaurant that has become among the best in London. Easy to spend £75 a head here (or more). Good, highly professional service, but a decidedly formal place—more so than Gordon Ramsey. The *Good Food Guide* rates it "Cooking 8," putting it in the top five or six in London with only Gordon Ramsey higher.

(32) **Gordon Ramsay**. 68 Royal Hospital Road (020-7352-4441)—in what were for many years the premises of La Tante Claire (of blessed memory). *The Good Food*

Guide gives this restaurant a rating of 9 and gives 8 to Pied-à-terre, The Capital, Tom Aikens, and Pétrus (also to The Square, which we did not much like when we tried it); The Ledbury gets 7. We ate our big splurge meal at Gordon Ramsay in 2001 and again in 2003, and the food was certainly superb. Starters included an oven-roasted tranche of foie gras with caramelized endives, carrot puree, and sauternes sauce; a warm salad of caramelized calf's sweetbreads with crispy scallops, grilled asparagus with sweet and sour vinaigrette; and a panache of roasted sea scallops with a truffle cauliflower purée and beignets, with barolo vinaigrette. Main courses: Fillets of red mullet cooked with saffron on a bed of marinated peppers and crab couscous with lemon grass nage; Roasted monk fish tail in spices with braised celeriac, confit of cepes, baby spinach with beignets of scallops; Fillet of sea bass wrapped in basil leaves, steamed, with new potatoes, celeriac purée, baby pak choi, crème fraîche and caviare sauce. We had a Gewürtztraminer Le Prince Abbés. Sweets included an assiette Aubergine (the name of Ramsay's former restaurant) for two, a crème brûlée, and a dessert wine (a Hugel et fils 1989 Gewürtztraminer vendange tardive). On the assiette was a sabayon with red fruits, a little crème brûlée with nutmeg and mace, a panna cotta with rum and caramel, a grand marnier chocolate ice cream, a chocolate soufflé with melted center, a milk ice with shaved chocolate, and a raspberry soufflé with chocolate. Between starters and main courses, we were given a lovely, refreshing palate cleanser made from pineapple purée, yogurt, champagne, dried pineapple, and crystallized cilantro leaf.

At a 3.5 hour lunch in January 2003 we nibbled our way rapturously through such dishes as Pressed foie gras layered with confit and smoked goose, marinated figs, picked girolles and French beans, a Salad of Scottish lobster tail with marinated baby vegetables, guacamole, Osetra caviar and tomato consommé (an £8 supplement), and Caramelised calves' sweetbreads with a fricassée of Jerusalem artichokes, white vegetables, baby spinach and Sauternes sauce (starters), and mains that included perfectly timed fish and the best pigeon Rob has ever consumed. Sweets are up to the rest, and that is really saying something.

Go for lunch and go hungry. Booking for supper must be done weeks or even months in advance, but getting in to lunch is possible in under a month. Set lunch is only £35 (a super price); ordering à la carte, expect to pay upwards of £100 or more with wine. Three courses (with lots of choice) at £65 is the basic rate. They offer a "Menu Prestige" (seven courses at £80) but the choice is very limited and we have not tried it. For a restaurant widely considered among the best in Europe this place is tiny (45 seats) and though formal and highly professional, surprisingly unstuffy. Jean-Claude Breton is head-of-house, and he is a jolly, jokey fellow who recognized us in a flash after a year away. A lovely place to eat, and a pleasure to take like-minded friends who are prepared to concentrate on the food.

(33) **Tom Aikens.** 43 Elystan Street, SW3 3NT. 020-7584-2003. New two years ago, and spectacularly good. Definitely one of the best places in London, in our view. Tom Aikens cooked fairly briefly at Pied-à-Terre some years ago ("not bad for an English," said the sommelier), and established now in an eponymous restaurant, he is working at a level competitive with any chef in London. Fit to stand with Gordon Ramsey, Pétrus, Pied a Terre, and the Capital. The premises are a few blocks from the South

Kensington tube stop. Sleek conversion of a nice pub space, lots of windows, black, brown, and white décor, with blinds achieving privacy plus light. Fifteen tables, and quite a lot of young, highly professional staff. The style of this cooking is ultra sophisticated and ultra complex—the most complex we’ve seen, and far better than anything ever eaten in NYC. All our meals here have been a la carte, but the set lunch is definitely a bargain. At Rob’s birthday meal in 2004 we further splurged to the extent of two pretty expensive bottles of wine. The first was their Schlumberger Gewurtztraminer; the second was one the sommelier recommended as able to follow the strong Gewurtztraminer without being totally overwhelmed—a white burgundy whose details we failed to record. We were brought a palate teaser that had a kind of froth on top that had whipped potato in it and something related to mushroom underneath. The starters were Salad of cured foie gras with pain d’épices, fig purée, and pickled carrots, shallots, and raisins; Carpaccio of tuna with tomato vinaigrette, basil oil, and bitter salad leaves, and hot duck cassonade with foie gras beignets, cured duck and prune puree. The main courses were roast John Dory fillets with lemongrass sauce, ginger, avocado, avocado purée and crab; roast native lobster with fresh almonds, borlotti beans, and lobster beignet; and roasted breast and confit leg of pigeon with foie gras beignets, braised shallots, and onion tart. On each plate, you would find mysterious lumps under semi-solid, shaped bits of sauce, and under those, as like as not, a smear of some other flavor. Flavors hidden under other flavors, jellied bits of unidentifiable somethings to add contrast all seemed the signature of this very labor intensive cooking. The revelation among these was the John Dory (a fish) with lemongrass; every time Judy ate a bite, she went into orgasmic ecstasies; all that we most like about lemongrass flavoring without the frequent bitter overtones were there, delicate and perfumy. The beignets of foie gras were sticks, rolled in breadcrumbs, and fried—delicious, though the bread tended to overpower the subtle liver taste. On my dish, I was particularly impressed by the way they got the caramelized sweetness in the onions without burning them. I need to study the possible techniques for doing that; I get it by broiling, but get a fair amount that is burned too, and while I like the acid/sweet combination, all that burned stuff isn’t good for the lining of the stomach. Then we got another palate teaser that included an opaque cherry jelly-pudding in the bottom, vanilla crème fraiche with cherries in it, and a cherry froth on top; I would have made it with sour rather than sweet cherries, but it was intense and interestingly varied in texture. This was served in a little cylindrical pottery bowl, almost 3 inches deep and only a bit more than an inch wide, and we complained to the waitress that the spoon, little though it was, couldn’t quite scrape all the bottom but my tongue was too short to reach it. Each dessert plate was based on a single flavor: lemon, grapefruit, fig, coffee/hazelnut, chocolate, strawberry, orange, and apricot. We tried the fig, coffee/hazelnut, and apricot. Each large plate had half a dozen ways of showing off these flavors. Each was architecturally complicated, with rolls and towers, cornets, and strips and blobs covered with sauces. For Kit, the revelation here was the fresh almonds on the apricot plate. She had never had fresh almonds, but had read of their milkiness, and these were nearly pure white. They were crisp but not hard, a bit like biting into a grape, but more crunch once you’d broken it. They were absolutely amazing, a texture for which Kit could find no real comparison—lychee might be close, but she dislikes that flavor so could not feel satisfied with that comparison. Texture

seemed more the point than flavor, which strengthens with toasting and drying. We had decaf pressecafé (Judy a tisane), and their petit fours came in an olivewood covered container that evoked the shape of a mushroom. Plus there was an array of flat, crispy/crinkly sweets—tuilles, they would probably be called; the most recognizable was a raspberry ‘leather’ but so thin that it was crisp; others had black and white sesame seeds, chunky toasted almonds, and I’m not sure what the others were. We crawled out, somewhat overfed but very impressed. A warning: according to newspaper reports, Aikens’ wife has left him (a real loss to front-of-house) and he has had at least one widely-reported public row with a female guest whom he accused (wrongly) of stealing a spoon. He lost his job at Pied-à-Terre for trying to brand a sous-chef with a hot fork (so the press says) and we have to wonder how well he is going to cope with running the place on his own. But we have no doubt about the brilliance of his cooking.

(34) **Aubergine.** 11 Park Walk, SW10. 020 7352-3449. A decade ago, Aubergine was where Gordon Ramsey cooked, and we had not been back since he stomped out in the middle of dinner one night—an event much reported in the newspapers, and one we were glad to have missed. We returned in June 2007 for lunch with Paul Hunter and Tom Lockwood, and we were glad we went. William Drabble is a first-rate chef, and the set lunch has to be one of the greatest food bargains in London—£34 for three excellent courses (plus some extras) *including* a half-bottle of quite fine wine *and* mineral water, coffee, and petit fours. At dinner they charge £64 for three courses, with a tasting menu (7 courses) for £77 (wine and extras not included). Drabble cooks fish extraordinarily well, and his foie gras is well reported. Sweets are trad but well executed. Michelin has given Aubergine only one star, but like *Time Out* we agree that it fully deserves two stars. Service is highly professional but friendly. A really nice restaurant with great food and pleasant ambiance. And the lunch is simply amazing for the money.

(35) **The Capital Hotel.** Basil Street, Knightsbridge (020-7589-5171). Long-time chef Philip Britten (sous-chef to Nico Ladenis in the early 80s and one of Britain’s top chefs in his own right) finally moved on, but Eric Chavot has proved a worthy successor and The Capital remains one of the best restaurants in London. We first ate here on December 24th in 1990, a day when most eating establishments have taken a holiday. Like the smoked fish and capers at Clarke’s or the foie gras and endive at Pied à Terre, the kidneys marinated in brandy and port were a REVELATION, something we shall remember as supreme in their class. Almost as rivetting was the intensely spinachy fettucini with smoked salmon and olive oil—exquisite. We think that the secret may be that the olive oil was infused with basil. Desserts included a caramelized apple tart and an apricot soufflé with orange sauce. Coffee was excellent and service was both good and inconspicuous. This was a set price lunch (£25 plus wine), and well worth every penny. Over the years, the dowdy decor was replaced with woodland tapestry and mirrors and etched glass—formal, but much livelier, and that has yielded to blond wood; I think we preferred the middle period, but one must move along. A meal in 1995 impressed us particularly with the starters: artichoke salad with sweetbreads, button onions, and endives; freshly marinated scallops in lemon and olive oil with tomatoes, anchovies, and tarragon; and terrine of duck chorizo, and foie gras prune and armagnac

jelly and corn salad leaves. Notable desserts included blackberry soufflé with Fromage Frais sorbet (superb—maybe best dessert eaten during the five months in 1995) and caramelized apple tart with vanilla custard. Cappuccino and petit fours were excellent. We have been back at lunch each of the last five years. In January 2003 we had (for example) seared tiger prawns and pasta served in a shellfish cappuccino and a pumpkin risotto with carrots, chorizo, and potato lardons as starters; brill on spinach with mustard sauce and a tagliatelle tower, and monkfish wrapped in prosciutto with anchovies, tomatoes, and fried mozzarella balls with broad beans as mains; pineapple brochette with lemon cake and basil sorbet and bittersweet chocolate tarte with caramelized pear as sweets. With an excellent bottle of New Zealand sauvignon blanc and service the bill came to just over £100. This was a spectacular meal, right off the set lunch menu (which has considerably more choice than most set menus).

Note: they have not been doing à la carte at lunch when we have been there lately. Current prices are £30 for the set lunch (3 courses); figure £65 for dinner—plus wine. The wine list is fabulous and fabulously priced, but there are plenty of good bottles in the vicinity of £30-35 and house wine is about £25 (with some wines available by the glass). This is a very small place with 35 seats, but because it is not trendy we have always been able to get a table. The cooking is imaginative and done at a very high level. Great place for a fancy meal on a Saturday or a Sunday. As one of the *Good Food Guide's* five top-rated restaurants in London the Capital is surprisingly unfrequented.

(36) **Foliage** (in the Mandarin Oriental Hyde Park Hotel) 66 Knightsbridge, SW1X 7LA. 020-7201-2001. (They pronounce the name Foly-ahhhge.) Rob and Judy and had a delightful three-hour lunch here with Harold Love in January 2004. Pretentiousness reigns: massive amounts of marble and polished brass, uniformed flunkeys, individual linen towels in the posh loos, etc. A single room for one night there starts at £375 and goes up to £4,500. Rob counted ten separate bows, scrapes, and stated good wishes from different flunkeys as they escorted us out. The food is quite fine (and if one sticks to the price fixe, only £25 for three courses) and there are good wines under £30 the bottle, though one could quickly get into the £2000 range if one chose to do so. The *Good Food Guide* rates the place a “6” which is about right: imaginative, innovative food, elegantly presented, but not on the level of Pied à Terre or Tom Aikens. (Judy’s response to waiters in short sleeves brought to mind an old *Punch* cartoon: Officer discovering with horror a trooper with a button undone: “Sergeant, take this man’s name; he’s half-nekked.”) Rob started with a Brandade of frogs leg raviolo (complex, delicate flavours and textures) served with four massive poached langoustines, shallot tempura, and a vegetable nage (langoustines first rate, the veggie nage a disappointment). Judy started with a duo of foie gras (very nice indeed), caramelized endive tarte tatin, and a vinaigrette of leeks. Rob’s main was pan-fried fillet of John Dory (cooked more than ideal), smoked haddock brandade (ok but not divine), roast scallops, Alsace bacon, and veggies à la greque (basically a circle of spicy diced carrots, quite tasty). Judy had herbed encrusted veal from Linnousin, risotto of cauliflower with truffle jus (very fine) and roast butternut squash (surprisingly nice, despite our rather gloomy view of said squash). Nicely complemented by a 2002 New Zealand Hawks Bay

Gewurtztraminer from Stonecroft. For sweets we had (1) a croustillant stappled vanilla with rosemary jelly, warm apple & mind salad and (2) a tian of chocolate, caramelized hazelnuts and banana with burnt orange sauce and yogurt ice cream. Nice food, great company, and a good view of Hyde Park. The loos alone were worth the price of admission. On a Saturday the place was practically empty at lunch, but as a hotel it ought to be a good bet for Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays.

(37) **Racine** 239 Brompton Road, SW3 2EP. 020-7584-4477. Highly touted by the restaurant guides, and deservedly so. Rob and Judy had an early supper there in January 2004 before a show at the Royal Court on John Richetti's recommendation and were *very* impressed. It is described as "Rustic French" by the *Good Food Guide*, but this really is very fine food. It is not competing with Gordon Ramsey, Tom Aikens, Pied-à-Terre, or the Capital, but it is in a totally different universe from Chez Gerard. Quite small. If one ate the £18.50 price fixe (available at lunch and 6-7:30 p.m.) and stuck to house wine it would be a hell of a bargain. They served a sweet butter we don't know ("Beurre Echiré) that was quite lovely. Judy virtually finished it off with a spoon, in the fashion of *Patience*. Rob started with a warm saffron and garlic mousse with mussels that was simply spectacular. We cannot imagine a better combo with mussels. Clearly a mussel in need of a mate should marry a saffron mousse. Judy started with a rough country paté that was excellent (and served with genuine French condiments). Her main was cod on crushed potatoes (as good a cod as we have ever eaten); Rob had scallops and brown shrimp with diced cucumber and bacon (and new potatoes on the side). Nice bottle of Viogner went beautifully with both. Very professional adult French service: pleasant, efficient, competent. Why can't all restaurants be so good? We asked them to be quick, and they did so well that we had time for a quick bite of sweets. We had a pot de crème de vanille au pruneaux (wonderfully intense vanilla crème on top of prune marinated, we would guess, in brandy) and a "riz au lait, compt d'airielle et gin": basically, a warm rice pudding that was unexpectedly divine (we not being great fans of rice pudding). We spent £80 and thought it a bargain. At another meal, the three of us had smoked Norfolk eel, fresh oysters, and a crab/fennel salad with chorizo and saffron mayonnaise as starters. We went on to dishes of monkfish, rabbit, and scallops. The monkfish chunks remind one how that is sometimes used to create faux lobster; the texture is similar. The rabbit had more flavor and was less chicken-like than usual, with an excellent mustard sauce, and was accompanied with smoked bacon. The scallops were brown outside but not too hard-cooked inside, with just a touch of lemony butter and artichoke heart with a parsley sauce inside. With that we had the wine of the week, a muscadet. We topped it all off with three glasses of dessert wines—a Jurançon 2001 Chateau Jolys, a Sauternes 2001 Chateau La Fleur d'or, and a rich Madiera, a 5 year old Blandy. You can eat wonderfully well here for £50 a head though you can spend more if you choose to. Our most recent dinner at Racine in June 2007 found them as good as ever.

(38) **Cambio de Tercio**. 163 Old Brompton Road, SW5. 020-7244-8970. For our money, the best Spanish restaurant in London. Small, cheerful, informal, open for both lunch and dinner on Sunday. £40 or so will get you an excellent meal. Octopus on a

fine potato puree sticks in our minds as a super dish. Many dishes are “foamed.” Foie gras with apple salad was excellent. Good bread and espresso. Good value wines (all Spanish). The three meals we have had here lately have all been a pleasure.

(39) **Zafferano**. 15 Lowndes Street, SW1X. 020-7235-5800. On the basis of two excellent dinners recently, we would call this one of the better Italian restaurants in London. Not cheap (look to spend £60 up) and not especially innovative, but they execute what they do at a very high standard. Breads are excellent. Foie gras is used with skill. Fish are cooked right. Pasta is tasty. Pheasant ravioli is not something one encounters many places. The set lunch (which we’ve not tried) runs £25-35 depending on the number of courses. Set dinner runs £30-50 (ditto), but with some supplements. Polished professional service. Good wine list, with some reasonably priced bottles at the bottom.

VII. MEALS AT A DISTANCE

(40) **Don Fernando Restaurant y Tapas Bar**. 27 F The Quadrant, Richmond (020-8948-2786). If you go to the new Orange Tree Theatre (and you should), this is a reliable place to eat. Just order lots of little dishes. We get (for example) griddled squid with garlic, bean and sausage casserole, lamb kidneys in sauce, a gaspacho, and an artichoke hearts vinaigrette. One meal of ours included deep fried artichoke hearts (wonderful), herbed lamb, monkfish and ham skewered and broiled, a potato and onion dish, and yet others. Rob and Judy had two excellent meals here in January 2003 and both times *loved* “Chipirones en su tinta”—a black griddled squid in its own ink dish made with dry Malaga wine—and we have ordered it with pleasure several times since then. And you can’t go wrong with the octopus. For dessert we tried a Rum Negrito (chocolate cake) and a Leche Fritta (a wonderful dessert that included lemon sorbet, cream, and the burned sugar crust of the sort on creme brulée—Judy insists on getting it every time). The various herbal Spanish liqueurs are rather sweet, but a pleasant way to end a supper before a frivolous show. Expect to pay £20-30 per head including wine and service. The restaurant can be found by walking out of the tube station, turning left and going to the end of the block—it’s on that corner. Not a fancy place, but a very nice spot for dinner five minutes’ walk from one of the best fringe theatres in London.

(41) **Bacco** (39 Kew Rd, Richmond TW9 2NQ, tel: 020 8332 0348) is a welcome addition to the Richmond eating scene. It’s an Italian restaurant right next door to the original Orange Tree pub, and when the Orange Tree performs at its usual time of 7:45, you can eat here (though not if they start at 7:30). The most memorable dishes we had are thin slices of aubergine with crab mix between them and a bit of pesto (worth working on a version of that), and a warm duck, bacon, and sliced almond salad, though overall we think our version of duck salad is better, and the bacon overpowered the flavor of duck, so we probably will not explore that. By way of sweet, we had two moscato wines plus a vin santo and dipped cantuccini. The white wine we had with the supper was Est Est Est trebbiano. Bacco gives a 10% discount on food to people with Orange Tree tickets. We have been back twice in the last three months with

considerable satisfaction. Figure £40-45 a head or so.

(42) **Sagar Vegetarian Restaurant.** 157 King Street, Hammersmith, W6 9JT. 020-8904-2227. We see a lot of shows in Hammersmith, what with the Lyric, the Lyric Studio, and Riverside Studios, and a really nice place to eat in easy walking distance of the theatres is a genuine boon. Sagar is South Indian Vegetarian, and it is open from noon to 11 p.m. Thursday through Sunday and from 5:30 for dinner Mon-Wed, so there is no problem about being able to eat before a 7:30 curtain. Rob and Judy ate an early dinner there in January 2004 and were delighted. We had potato bonda and sev poori; an excellent brinjal bhajee, a nice sag paneer, a fabulous lemon rice, and some of the best sweet lassi we have ever drunk. We tried the batura for a bread (an amusing giant puffball that was quite tasty). Indian beer was our main drink. For sweets we had a very respectable mango kulfi and sheera (a hot semolina dish with lots of cardamom and yellow raisins that delighted us). Altogether a fine meal. This is more serious cooking than other South Indian places of our acquaintance, and distinctly more expensive than Ravi Shankar (about £50 for two, ordering à la carte), but Sagar offers food worth serious attention. A real find, especially for the area, and we hope it flourishes. Note that thalis are available in the £8-12 range. We've been back several times, always with satisfaction.

(43) **Tas** (33 The Cut, SE1 8LF, tel: 020 7928 2111)

Tas is a Turkish restaurant with a wide-enough ranging menu that you can find dishes you've never tried before. Among the unusual dishes were a chestnut puree dessert (glorious) and a yogurt with pomegranate molasses and ground nuts (which was more than all right). This restaurant is useful for South Bank eating, since you can walk easily to The Old Vic, The Young Vic, and The National Theatre and other South Bank complex venues.

(44) **Wapping Food**, part of the Wapping Project, is located in a former hydraulic power plant. Much of the heavy machinery from the hydraulic plant is still there, but scattered around in the large area (with 40 or more foot ceilings at a guess) were chic tables. Large candles were perched on horizontal surfaces of the old machinery. Part of the kitchen was visible; part, we think, was downstairs. Our starters, which we split 1/3 each, were grilled squid with marinated shitake and vermicelli salad teriyaki; foie gras and confit venison terrine, toast, and onion marmelade; and seared scallops, celeriac puree, pickled girolles and beetroot crisps. Each was excellent. We followed them with line caught seabass fillet, buffalo ricotta and wild mushroom ravioli, broad beans, and tarragon butter; grilled yellow fin tuna, steamed purple broccoli (actually what we would call broccoli rabe), new potatoes and hollandaise; and pot roast partridge, cep dauphinoise, jerusalem artichoke, braised endive, and thyme. We also got a salad side dish to share (superb Tuscan olive oil gave it flavor). For me, the broad beans were a revelation, definitely the best such beans I have ever eaten, and they generate interest in trying to cook them myself. We drank an Australian Viognier with it; that had a surprising amount of character. For dessert, we settled on a half bottle of their Carramar Estate Botrytis Semillon (rather too sweet for our tastes) and mixed cantucci (biscotti).

All the starters were superb. The mains were quite good. Our only objection was the amount of salt, which became rather bothersome as the evening wore on. An unusual characteristic was a huge screen against the back wall that showed a film of the cooks working in the kitchen. All the views were from overhead, so we don't really see the cooks, just their hands going about the varied business. Shortly before we left it started repeating, so it is timed pretty well to cover half the evening. We gather that the head of house had two other films made too, so different ones show each night. Judy and I both watched fascinated to see how things were done. The head of house also stopped by and talked at various points, we being obvious newcomers, and it turns out that she ran the Royal Court theatre for a good number of years, so we were able to talk theatre. She insisted that we go see the gallery in the back, and it was indeed worth seeing. The actual show, 12 huge photographs, were neither here nor there for us, but the space was strangely shaped, and they had the atmospherics worked up with taped sounds, and leaves on the floor, so that those rustled as one walked through toward the pictures. All in all, a restaurant well worth going back to, preferably for lunch so one could see Wapping better, and it might be worth asking for less salt. Wapping might be an awkward place to live when it comes to getting to work, it being a bit out of the way, but the wharf-warehouse buildings and their modern equivalents (being designed to look similar and echo the lines of the originals) really did catch the eye as aesthetically satisfying. Some of them have wonderful river views.

(45) **The Fat Duck** (High Street Bray, SL5 2AQ, tel: 01628 580333) In March 2005, we made a pilgrimage to Maidenhead (nearly an hour out of London by train) to have a special lunch celebrating Kit's college chair at THE FAT DUCK, the small restaurant run by chef Heston Blumenthal. During our last sabbatical, Blumenthal was beginning to get notice for his "wild" cooking. He's a serious chemist of taste and taste combinations, and he made all sorts of headlines by using non-food flavors—straw, tobacco, pine, douglas fir. Some food guides have slammed him, and even the positive ones feel obliged to register the objections of their disgusted-in-Tunbridge-Wells reporters, but to us what he was doing was simply superb. We have now eaten at enough top restaurants since our first sabbatical in 1983-84 that upper-level French and Continental cooking is unfortunately beginning to seem all too much the same. When you've eaten the exquisite creations of Nico Ladenis, Pierre Kaufman, Gordon Ramsay, Marcus Wareing, Philip Brittain, Tom Aikens, and the original chef at Pied à Terre (Richard Neat), you do not meet many surprises. THAT is the stage at which one should try Heston Blumenthal, because you will find superb and very original cooking, and the pleasure is in trying to guess what? how? which? whatever? as each flavor crosses your tongue. The individuality starts with the sign outside that shows a spoon, knife, and fork, the spoon bowl being a duck's bill, the knife blade being a feather, and the fork being a webbed duck's foot. The premises are clearly old, and at least some of the beams are ancient—17th century at a guess. They were mostly high enough that only exceptionally tall people would have run the risk of bumped heads. The china was white, with white lines around the wide edges (lines running like lines on a phonograph disk, circularly). The shapes of the dishes were most unusual, including such items as a bowl (cup sized) sitting on a cube with an indented top to cradle it at an angle. When

sharp knives were called for, they were Laguignole, the French knife-maker. The menus (copies of which they give one as souvenirs) have an amazing texture, suedy and parchmenty at the same time. The paper almost feels alive.

We decided to go for the tasting menu which (including the tidbits with coffee) let us taste 16 items. We also got the wine-by-the-glass option, and were delighted with the selections. They were exceptional with the food, highly varied, and interestingly non-French. All portions were tiny, so we did not feel stuffed at the end, and the timing was just right, so each morsel had time to settle before the next little dish arrived. Service was impeccable, and while the accents occasionally muffled the explanations, the staff was willing to repeat, and they clearly cared about the food and believed in it.

The first four items were accompanied by a Spanish sherry, E. Lustau Fino Puerto—the first sip of which seemed to play arpeggios all up and down the full palatal keyboard. It never settled in any one place—high and sharp, low and mellow—but kept playing scales up and down. As the sommelier noted, there was even a hint of salt from its place of origin by the sea. The first palate teaser was a green tea and lime mousse (an eggwhite foam with those flavors) that was sprayed from an aerosol into a spoon, and the blob dropped off into liquid nitrogen. The hardened-frozen ball was then put on your plate and you were advised to pop the whole thing in your mouth, so that the heat of your tongue would explode the icy but paper-thin shell and collapse it to crunch-foam-liquid-air-nothing in your mouth. Brightly cleansing. For me the performance brought back memories of a Science Museum demonstration of an ordinary rubber ball that was dipped into liquid nitrogen and then dropped onto the floor; instead of bouncing, it shattered. The second offering was an oyster in the shell, placed on a passion fruit jelly and with that a bit of horseradish cream (mercifully not sweetened, as seems to be the custom in GB). Lavender was on the presentation tray, but I did not detect its flavor, so it may have served as olfactory accompaniment. This gave one the texture and saltiness of the oyster, sweet-sour-muskiness of the passionfruit, and sharp-hot-tartness of the horseradish. The third was a tiny spoonful of ice cream made with pommery grain mustard sitting in a large tablespoon of red cabbage essence and on top of a half teaspoon of minutely chopped onion (and maybe some other crunchy veg), the cabbage liquid and chopped onion together being called *gaspacho*. The fourth was quail jelly (in a cup, as if tea), langoustine cream, and *parfait* of foie gras (that being what looked like a little bit of chocolate ice cream).

The next dish was Snail Porridge with Jabugo Ham and shaved fennel. The wine was 2003 Grüner Veltliner Smaragd Achleiten Prager (Austria), a very high class version of that wine. We have enjoyed Grüner Veltliner in Vienna and Prague, but have had no luck getting any that's good in Pennsylvania, and no luck so far in London, though one could from a good wine merchant, I'm sure. The porridge was steel-cut oats fixed as a risotto in an intense stock with parsley, so it was green porridge—uniform green, not flecky; on top were snails (dark colored, not tough, and while the flavor was not intense, it was good). The shaved fennel was so thin that it baffled one's taste buds, almost evanescent before one could quite identify the flavor of the thin little ribbons. The ham shavings were so microscopic that they just contributed subtle variations.

Roast foie gras with almond fluid gel, cherry and chamomile came next, the almond gel supplying some of the "sweet" that often comes with foie gras in the form of

sauternes. This, though, was more subtle and less sweet, and the wine served was a 2003 Tokaji Furmint, Szent Tamas, Szepsy (Hungary), which was not a sweet Tokay, but just a bit richer than ordinary white wine, pushing a bit toward sherry perhaps.

The next was the fish course: sardine on toast sorbet (yes, sorbet that tasted of sardine on toast), ballotine of mackerel 'invertebrate'—meaning a boneless cross-sectional slice of very fresh mackerel (very little cooked if at all), and marinated daikon. We took that for ginger, but were corrected. The wine was 2002 Riesling Gold-Quadrat, S. Kuntz, Mosel (Germany). Further fish was supplied by Salmon poached with Liquorice (a small piece about 2 inches square and an inch thick, covered in a smooth brown case that seemed to have cabbage or some other leaf in it), asparagus, pink grapefruit (the individual grapefruit cells had been teased apart and sprinkled on the plate), Manni olive oil. The salmon was almost sushi; it had not been overcooked and still retained its melting tenderness that's only possible when the fats have not been melted out. With this they served a red wine, 2001 La Grola IGT Veneto, Allegrini (Italy).

Then we had poached breast of Anjou pigeon pancetta, pastilla of its leg, pistachio, cocoa and quatre épices. I am not quite sure how the term pancetta applies, unless it means rib meat from the pigeon. We had breast of pigeon, its leg fixed separately (very rare) and some portion of what seemed its meat done in a triangular package with a kind of crust on the outside that appeared to have been deep fried. With this came an amazingly good Australian wine, a 2002 Shiraz Viognier Yering Station from the Yarra Valley. We know Viognier only as a good white wine and were told that 10% for this came from Viognier grapes, the rest from Shiraz. It was a beautiful full-bodied wine, well worth looking for. It had none of the tanic acidity that for us makes a lot of reds less attractive.

Next came a trio of palate teasers. A little white chocolate disk with caviare on top (creamy, chocolatey, sweet, plus salt, rich); Mrs. Marshall's Margaret Cornet, and Pine sherbet dib dab (a white powder with a strong pine taste). The cornet had a bit of sorbet, and the cornet itself has a history, and they supply a little card explaining that Mrs Marshall was the author of four cook books (1885-1904), ran a shop selling cooking wares, ran a cookery school, and a magazine. Despite American claims to have invented the ice cream cone, she wrote a recipe for one in 1888, 16 years before American or Italian claimants produced cones. She was the first person to make ice cream using liquid gas, and one of her machines was found and tested, and it made a litre in 3 minutes, which is much faster than any contemporary machine can do so.

Next came mango and douglas fir puree with a bavarois of lychee and mango, and black current sorbet. With this was a 1989 Riesling Beerenauslese Reichgraf von Kesselstadt. Truth to tell, I did not get much douglas fir flavor, which disappointed me because I like evergreen smells, but the fruit flavors were excellent.

Then a carrot and orange tuile, bavarois of basil beetroot jelly.

The final stage was based on jokes about breakfast. Because the main item was a bite of ice cream that tasted of bacon and eggs, they solemnly presented us first with our breakfast cereal. This was a little box labeled The Fat Duck cereal, and we opened it to find a packet with some whitish shavings. We put these in a small bowl, and were offered a whitish liquid to pour over them. The liquid was not quite milk, and the

shavings had nice crunch but were clearly not cereal, and we were totally unable to pinpoint the flavor, but it turned out to be parsnip! both the crisps and the milk. Then we had the ice cream, a finger-length of pain perdu (french toast) made I suspect with some of their superb large crumb sour dough bread, and jelly made from tea. With the “breakfast” came an oloroso solera India Osborn Sherry from Spain.

With excellent coffee came 4 chocolates: leather, pine, and tobacco (plus one other flavor—straw, we think). The tobacco was the most striking, and rather good. Also with this came a praline rose tartlet.

This was a truly memorable meal, and we shall hope to come back. To enjoy it to the full, you have to enjoy having your leg pulled. You have to be willing for “ice cream” to taste of something that has nothing to do with sweets, and find your dessert flavors in some other form. We’re not sure why these sleight of hands make some diners uncomfortable and dismissive. Well, yes—violation of boundaries, ungrammaticality and the like. Back in the days of structuralism when menus were discussed as grammars having a syntactic structure, many of these items would have been “ungrammatical”—Kit’s favorite example of that (when explaining the concept to students) being “chocolate cake smothered in onions.” If, though, you are comfortable with the grammar and syntax, you can afford to push it to its margins and beyond. This meal was a lot more like modern poetry or some kinds of postmodern novel. It gave one highly original food for thought as well as for the stomach. A month after our lunch, it won first place in RESTAURANT MAGAZINE’S 2005 “World’s 50 Best Restaurants” list. Such ratings are silly, but Heston Blumenthal’s cooking is worth every penny—an experience to be savored and long cherished. We will return.

RESTAURANTS DELISTED or DISRECOMMENDED.

Having had two disasters in a row at **Rasa Samudra** (5 Charlotte Street—the fish-serving branch of a well known veggie Indian place called Rasa) we do not care to go back. Grossly overcooked fish, poor spicing, and surly, indifferent service will spoil any meal. We have not been back to the original **Rasa** (55 Stoke Newington Church Street, N16) or its younger sibling at 6 Dering Street W1: we liked the original Rasa a lot in 1998. Pity about Rasa Samudra: fish in Indian style can be splendid, and is not easy to come by. We went to **Noura Brasserie** (16 Hobart Place, near Victoria) in late autumn 2004 and had one of the most unpleasant experiences we have ever suffered in a restaurant. It has been highly rated by food guides among Lebanese restaurants, and that is a cuisine we love. We found the food quite decent (if not up to published reports) but we found their obnoxious attitude towards women and their arrogant incompetence about wine completely intolerable. Our advice is to avoid these jerks. Looking for a good upscale non-veggie Indian place, we returned to the well-known and highly rated **Red Fort** (77 Dean Street) for the first time in several years and found ourselves severely disappointed. We would have been unthrilled at half the price, and the staff’s snotty attitude did not help. **New Mayflower** (Shaftesbury Avenue) gets good reviews for Cantonese food, but we found the food mediocre and the exceptionally aggressive attempts to cheat customers out of two tips offputting.

OTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION ABOUT LONDON RESTAURANTS:

The best serious descriptions of good-to-fabulous London restaurants are to be found in *The Good Food Guide*, published each autumn for the coming year as a paperback (currently about £17). It covers the whole of England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland (with rather thin coverage outside of London, which gets 187 pages (of roughly 700). Writeups of major restaurants are *quite* detailed and seriously knowledgeable; they include information on phones, prices, hours, days of operation, price-fixe arrangements, etc. *The Good Food Guide* is in a totally different universe from a handy pocket-reference to a wide range of good, trendy, and indifferent restaurants such as Zagat for London, which (at £9) will give you what Zagat customarily gives you. If you want passably serious descriptive evaluation of a large number of restaurants all over London, try *Time Out's* annual *Eating and Drinking* (£11—and infinitely more valuable than the brief and superficial Zagat). It is broken down by cuisine and then by location; it has good maps and indexes. If you find yourself needing a place to eat in the wilds, the *Time Out* annual is what you need. The weekly issues of *Time Out* are little use for restaurant purposes and full of pop culture and quasi-pornographic crap, but are the best source for both mainstream and fringe theatre performance information. *What's On* (its principal weekly magazine competition) has become a rather sorry and uncompetitive remnant that appears to be on its last legs.

APPENDIX: SOME INDIAN DISHES

Any visitor to London should try Indian food, unless unable or unwilling to eat spicy dishes. The two most standard versions are “Tandoori” (specializing in meats and breads cooked in a tandoor oven) and “Vegetarian.” Most Tandoori restaurants have reasonably comprehensible menus, and you can't go too far wrong ordering things like “mixed grill” or particular meat dishes. Veggie places (especially South Indian Bhel Poori houses) can be a lot more confusing. In alphabetical order, here are a few terms you may find useful. If one of us is eating a light dinner alone at a Bhel Poori house, 2-3 starters plus a sweet will do nicely. Or alternatively, one can order a “thali”—a one-plate sampler of several dishes, usually including some form of bread and sweet. The price at a Bhel Poori place will probably run under £10, including beverage and tip.

A basic tip for the uninitiated: Indian food can be very spicy indeed, and if you feel a hot column descending from your mouth, have a sweet dessert. That puts out the fires.

Bhel Poori

a South Indian street food in origin, made by the vendor's taking a handful of this and that from bowls on his cart, and pouring a sauce over it. (Indian friends told us that the food won't be authentic unless the vendor has a bad cold and sprays germs all over the concoction—so the London versions we saw—clean, streamlined, polished—may not give you the full Indian experience.) The

ingredients include puffed basmati rice (a sort of rice crispy), sev (deep-fried angel-hair thin noodles made from chickpea flour), pooris (miniature wheat breads fried, rather like wheat thin crackers), chopped raw onion, fresh coriander, and a sauce made up of yogurt and tamarind sauce (sour), and various spices. Absolutely delicious in this and all its variants (potato poori, pani poori etc). Best version we've had was at the **Ravi Shankar Bhel Poori House** on Drummond Street near Euston.

Dahi Vada

usually served as two balls about the size of a small scoop of ice cream; made from a lentil paste that is deep fried, then soaked, then squeezed out. They sit in a sauce that has yogurt and tamarind, but in the best versions, the two sauces are put on separately and so do not mix thoroughly, so you get mouthfuls with the two separate flavors. However improbable it sounds, it's delicious, and *not* hot.

Dhosa or Dosa

a crepe-like pancake, either limp and flexible or crispy and brittle. You tear off bits and use them to pick up the accompanying stuffing. Stiff ones come half-rolled and look very much like the phonograph horn in His Master's Voice illustrations of circa 1920.

Gulab Jamun

a sweet consisting of balls about the size of doughnut holes; they appear to be made from a grainy sort of cake, but in fact are a form of long-boiled down milk curd. Brown on the outside, yellowy inside. Served in syrup. Sounds ghastly, but is a delicious form of sweet cake. If your mouth is on fire at the end of the meal, a few bites of gulab jamun will soon extinguish the flames.

Kulfi

an Indian iced-milk, sometimes called Indian ice cream. The more creamy textured it is, the less authentic (and less good). The real thing is spectacular. Three common flavors: badam (with chopped almonds), pista (pistachio), and mango. The badam is made with milk, brown sugar, chopped almonds, and ground cardamom seed.

Lassi

a yogurt drink, served either sweet (faintly sweetened, with cardamom and usually a bit of ground pistachio nut on top) or salted. Refreshing, and goes well with spicy Indian food. Sweet flavors of any sort help cool the effect of hot spicing.

Naan

a white yeast bread, made by throwing a flat piece of dough against the inner wall of a tandoor (beehive) oven, and as it cooks, the dough also slides

downward into a teardrop-shape. Naans can be plain or stuffed, with meat, or, as Peshwari Naan, with ground almonds and ground sultana raisins. A bit like superb pizza crust, and always worth having if the restaurant has a tandoor oven. There is no substitute for that; very occasionally in a bad restaurant without such an oven, they will pass pita bread off as Naan. The real thing is fresh and unmistakable.

Paratha

a whole wheat tortilla-like bread

Samosa

an egg-roll wrapper or thin pastry dough is wrapped triangularly about cooked potato and peas, spiced with black mustard seeds, among other things, and then quickly deep fried.

Shrikand

a dessert made from yogurt whipped with sugar, saffron, and ground cardamom seed. Extremely sweet, but fine lemony flavor.

Tandoori

Indian cuisine relying heavily on use of the tandoor oven. Especially good for meat, fish, and breads.

A POSTSCRIPT ABOUT THEATRES

A surprising number of Londoners and visitors to London go to the National and to the West End commercial theatres, but not to fringe venues. Unless you have very conservative tastes and like to waste money, this is a mistake. Many of the best things we have seen in London over the last 25 years have been in fringe venues. These range from fancy purpose-built structures (The Orange Tree, in Richmond) to truly grungy basements and attics (often attached to a shabby pub). Buy *Time Out* and see what is on at the Arcola (a converted factory in Dalston, accessible via 38 bus), the Finborough (easy walk from Earl's Court tube), The Gate at Notting Hill, The Rosemary Branch in Islington, the Menier Chocolate Factory on the South Bank, the Battersea Arts Centre, Riverside Studios, Wilton's Music Hall near the Tower of London, the White Bear near Kennington, and other fringe venues. And of course the Almeida in Islington is neither West End nor fringe, but it consistently mounts better productions than the National or the RSC.