



Gastro Turf

Life after spotted dick: A pint tippler's guide to London's culinarily enlightened gastropubs

>>THE WELL

The gastropubs are rather spiffy in shabby-chic Clerkenwell, a once forgotten slice of central London now crammed with yuppie lofts and boutique ad agencies. During lunch at the Well, we busied ourselves with tall and fiery Bloody Marys and traditional pub grub—upgraded and farm fresh. None of it is for the diet-conscious: Crisp pork belly, irresistibly larded with fat, arrived with leeks and enormous Jerusalem artichokes, while a steak sandwich found its cholesterolic match in rich *dauphine* potatoes. 180 St. John Street, 020-7251-9363.

>>THE COW

When I dropped by Tom Conran's joint (that's Terence's son) in trendy Notting Hill one Monday afternoon, the place was jammed with newly hitched trust-funders sucking down smokes while balancing babies on their knees. Seafood's the thing here, some of London's finest—six oysters and a pint of Guinness, big shellfish platters for two, simmering fish stews. "I'm off to a funeral," one young chap announced midway through lunch, leaving two couples—tots in tow—to dish about their hired help and slurp down one

The Well, *below*, specializes in hearty but refined dishes. Try the roasted duck with red-wine-and-rosemary jus, *left*.

In the old days—way back in, say, 1989—nights out in London had nothing to do with dinner and everything to do with a well-poured pint. "We used to say 'Eating is cheating,'" my north London friend explained. "Brits can do without food but not without their pubs." Dreary places with frayed upholstery and walls the color of tobacco-stained teeth, pubs once served food so notoriously bad that there were, as my friend says, "many nights when you just drank through dinner."

Then, one momentous day in 1991—before Jamie and Nigella and Nobu on Old Park Lane—two blokes started serving outstanding rustic grub in a run-down old boozery.

The Eagle, London's first "gastropub," still had those same putrid-yellow walls, but instead of serving bangers and mash, it doled out sausages with new potatoes, Jerusalem artichokes and pickled radicchio. Fish-and-chips? How about grilled red mullet with roasted peppers, eggplant, French beans and basil? Today, thank God, it seems there's a gastropub on nearly every corner (and even one that just opened in New York City, courtesy of Bono and a host of other boldfaced investors). They're filled with young Londoners scarfing down free-form creations by many of the city's most talented young chefs. Here are five of the finest.



of Ireland's better exports, Irish Native oysters. "They taste of Ireland," one of them said. "They taste of the Irish Sea." 89 Westbourne Park Road, 020-7221-0021.

»» THE WESTBOURNE

London artist Sebastian Boyle—Jade Jagger's ex—runs a pub that's a little bit Euro and a whole lot rock 'n' roll (check out the Elvis Costello and Negresses Vertes posters on the wall). When Boyle first opened the place, he announced that old-time pub crawlers would still be welcome. The night we dropped by, one codger in tweed stood teetering at the bar, eyeing the mass of MTV extras. While he sobered up before heading home, I ordered pristine grilled salmon with fennel and fava beans, as well as a medium-rare lamb steak cooked just so. I then returned to my tiny, cramped table. A young guy close enough to blow smoke in my drink confided to his mates that sometime after dinner he planned to disappear to India or Turkey. "You know," he said. "Off on an internal quest." 101 Westbourne Park Villas, 020-7221-1332.



Expect delicate creations at the Peasant, *left*, such as a globe artichoke with a soft-boiled egg and hollandaise, *above*.

»» THE PEASANT

The name's a misnomer at this former gin joint. Most gastropubs revel in bold, hearty presentations, but the chef in front of this stove serves up delicate white-tablecloth fare, well worth the few extra quid you'll pay for the pleasure. After enjoying one lofty creation—a roasted butternut squash ringed with creamy Gorgonzola sauce and stuffed with oyster-mushroom risotto—I walked over to the bar to introduce myself to the sous-chef. "I was admiring your food," he said to me. "It looked colorful." He had been working at the Peasant for a little more than a year and was having a lot of fun. "It's like home cooking," he said. "You can muck in it; no reining in, no holds barred." 240 St. John Street, 020-7336-7726.

»» THE EAGLE

"The crowd here is so Shoreditch," my friend said, eyeing the boisterous mob that nightly packs London's original gastropub. Shoreditch, for the uninitiated, is the hip—and pricey—neighborhood favored by young strivers trying a little too hard to be edgy. The daily menu, scribbled on multiple blackboards, offers things like simple salads kicked up a half-dozen notches by the quality of their ingredients. A heap of octopus, skate and monkfish rested on a bed of arugula. Plump grilled chicken tenderloin was paired with avocado, Parmigiano-Reggiano and wide swaths of prosciutto. We were happy to discover that each dish, still among the best gastropub grub in town, went surprisingly well with a freshly pulled pint. 159 Farringdon Road, 020-7837-1353.—JAY CHESHES

