

From the *Time Out London Eating & Drinking Guide* – sample reviews

Axis, 2011

One Aldwych Hotel, London WC2

Should you be looking for a mellow, stylish hideaway for quiet conversation in central London, this could be it: once you've descended the oddly narrow, stone-clad spiral staircase into this drum-shaped hotel basement not a sound enters from the traffic outside, and the ambient sounds are very muted. Décor is carefully styled in subtle colours, with a row of metal bamboo poles the only odd note. Service is smooth and very attentive. The kitchen can certainly turn it on when it needs to: chilled tomato consommé with basil and poached langoustines, from a special summer menu highlighting British tomatoes, was an absolutely exquisite infusion of elusive flavours; from the main menu, welsh rarebit with plum tomato salad was a satisfyingly refined version of an everyday standby. Breast of chicken with tarragon, a rich jus and a variety of fresh veg, on the other hand, was enjoyable but more routine, while seared scallops came with fennel purée with an oddly bitter taste. Prices are quite high for the main menu and wines, but the set lunch and pre- and post-theatre menus are bargains.

Langan's Brasserie, 2010

Stratton Street, London W1

As a London institution, Langan's offers some unchanging virtues. There's the grand dining room itself, with its raffish art collection and the Dorian Grey-picture of the founders still on the menu, a 1970s Michael Caine at the centre. Being attended to by the ultra-professional, slightly eccentric waiters, the senior ones resembling characters in something by Graham Greene, is always a pleasure. Langan's has long been a favourite of gents-who-lunch; maybe it's the crisis, but these were thin on the ground the afternoon we visited, leaving the staff with oddly little to do, purring along like a Ferrari being used for the school run. London institutions often like to sit on their laurels, but thankfully there was not much evidence of that here. A Langan's seafood salad featured flavoursome prawns, octopus, cockles and more, assembled with generosity and seasoned with vibrantly fresh herbs. The day's special, pan-fried beef with red wine sauce, was succulently juicy, and cooked absolutely right. It went perfectly with the punchy but suave, suitably traditional

house red. Eating here is not cheap – especially as all vegetables are extra, and there’s a cheeky ‘cover charge’ – but at least you get some panache for your pounds.

Le Relais de Venise l’Entrecôte, 2008

120 Marylebone Lane, London W1

Choice is something we all crave, so we are told. How do you explain, then, that a restaurant like this has people queueing out the door (you can’t book)? It’s a near-exact copy of its mother-brasserie in Paris, down to waitresses in black dresses and little white aprons, who are brisk, in time-honoured Parisian style, but (in our experience) friendly and helpful too. And there’s no choice, for first or second course: just a simple green salad with walnuts and a punchy vinaigrette to start, followed by entrecôte steak (served in two ‘rounds’, so it doesn’t get cold) with fries and Le Relais’s ‘famous sauce’, the recipe for which is supposedly as secret as the Coke formula. The attraction is in the detail: the steak is first-rate, and cooked exactly as ordered; so good is it in fact that it would be nice to try it without that sauce (a rich, herby, mustardy concoction) – but that’s not an option. The potatoes are definitive, perfect frites (no one could call them ‘chips’), and the bargain house Bordeaux goes down great with steak. Choice reappears with the desserts: classic patisserie and a very correct cheeseboard. Very enjoyable.

Bermondsey Kitchen

194 Bermondsey Street, London SE1

A case study in the transformation of once-grimy old London. It sits opposite a 1907 pile called the Time and Talents Settlement, which presumably strived to keep local urchins on the straight and narrow. Nowadays, modern urchins and urchinettes can pop across the street to lounge on leather sofas or at plain wooden tables, around an open range that produces interesting, eclectic food. The menu is as much gastropub- as restaurant-style, with strong Spanish influences. Superior organic and/or rare breed meats are a feature, mostly sourced from the Ginger Pig farm in Yorkshire. Juxtapositions of meat and fruit, savoury and sweet, seem to be a recurring theme too, as in pan-fried scallops with pomme purée – yes, scallops’n’apple sauce, which turned out to be delicious – or a great, hefty grilled white pudding with pearl barley and prunes wrapped in pancetta. However, these

combos are not compulsory, and simpler things are on offer too, as in grilled sea bass with sorrel mash. Staff are laidback but attentive, and the imaginative but very well-priced wine list goes just right with the easygoing atmosphere. There's a pan-Mediterranean range of tapas for lighter eating, and at weekends the Kitchen serves a very popular high-quality brunch.