

## NOTES ON DINING IN LONDON - MARCH 2006

Over the years we have spent a lot of time in London, basically because we love its theater, and that is all that we do except, of course, have lunch before the matinee and dinner after the evening play. In our 6 days we saw 11 plays. Because there are no matinees on Monday it was not possible to do 12.

London has always been a terribly expensive place to go. Transportation, restaurants, and hotels are all far above Paris and the weak dollar made it seem even more so. You can save on transportation by getting an oyster card which entitles you to all trains and buses for a week. If we had stayed in the same hotel that we stayed during our two previous trips (The Lanesborough) the cost would have been between \$800 and \$900 per day which is a little absurd. Fortunately by Googling apartments, we were able to find a nice place for 1500£ a week.

To begin with we have never eaten better in London than we did this last trip. All of the places we tried were new to us. We decided to skip favorites such as Zafferano, The Square, River Café, etc. The restaurants I mention are mostly in the Michelin Red Guide; for others the address, etc. is added.

Probably our best overall meal was a dinner at the Michelin one star, Richard Corrigan at Lindsay House. Because we always have dinner after the theater we arrived at about 10:30 and were informed that the tasting menu was not available after 10:00. We protested because we were not informed of this when we made the reservation. Fortunately cooler heads prevailed (Richard Corrigan) and we had the tasting menu at 64£. Besides a plate of *canapés* there were six courses and *mignardises*. The *foie gras*, scallops, turbot and venison were all of two star quality. The cheese and the chocolate dessert were much less impressive. Wonderful Irish soda bread was served with the meal and we had a good Côtes du Rhone. It was also the most expensive meal we had at 191.25£ which included a glass of Champagne.

A close second for dinner was another one star - Nobu. We arrived at 9:30 for a 10:30 reservation because the play we saw was over much earlier than we had anticipated. It seemed like there would be a long wait till I spotted two seats at the sushi bar where the same menu is served so we grabbed them. It was really a good move, and if we returned I would sit there again. Service was great and we could really see the action. A terrific young waiter helped us put together a ten course menu. In my little three star rating system I gave nine of the ten courses a star or a star and a half. Only the *foie gras* served with unagi and soba didn't work well. Pairing a wine to go with this type of food is a daunting task, but our waiter chose the perfect wine, a 2004 Gavi from Italy. Cost was 182£

Nobu will only accept reservations one month before the date that you desire, and they are quite strict about it.

Nahm, located in the Halkin Hotel, is the only Thai restaurant to rate a Michelin star, and that includes Paris where there are many. Dinner started with two fabulous *amuse-bouches* that both rated a star. Then we had four more items and all were worthy of a star. I won't take the space to describe each dish, but one example was a stir fried red curry of pork belly and fish cake with wild ginger and green beans. The other three dishes were just as fascinating. Again the waiter chose the perfect wine, an Australian 2003 Shiraz blended with some Viognier from Yalumba. Cost for the two of us was 94.25£, reasonable for such a fine and unique dining experience.

One of the most popular places is a Chinese restaurant called Hakkasan. It is noisy, smoky, crowded and the scene at the bar was wild. But the place had very good ventilation and the food was really superb and unique. We had pork ribs, a divine seafood dish, wonderful chicken in a clay pot, asparagus with lotus root, and great fried rice with egg and black bean sauce. Dessert was a very good ginger ice cream. Service, despite the crowd, was very good and cost was 108£.

Bentley's Oyster Bar, sort of London institution, was recently taken over by Richard Corrigan. By the time we got there the restaurant upstairs was closed so we ate downstairs at a table in back of the oyster bar. I can't remember the last time I had native oysters. These are oysters that are not farmed and the ones I had were judged to be about ten years old. They were amazingly good and quite large. For appetizers we had a Mediterranean fish soup and a Thai crab and mussel soup, both worthy of a star. Arlene had a piece of blue mullet which was good, but not outstanding. I had the Bentley's fish pie that had béchamel, prawns, smoked cod and mashed potatoes; it was classic English food, and I thought it was excellent. I started with a glass of Champagne and our wine was a 2004 Gamay from the Touraine which was very good. Cost was a reasonable 80.60£. We were the last ones out at 12:30.

Another extremely popular place is J. Sheekey. We started with char-grilled razor clams with chorizo and wild garlic, and then we had their specialty, a salt baked wild sea bass with fennel served for two persons. Both dishes were good, but not quite up to one star quality. Our white wine was a very nice 2004 Lurton Sauvignon from the Languedoc. Cost was 90.25£ without service. Service was so perfunctory, unfriendly, and unresponsive that for one of the few times I left nothing for service.

We have always been reluctant to eat at Indian restaurants because we have been to India many times and it is difficult to pay many times the cost in India. But, on a gourmet friend's recommendation we had a dinner at Tamarind, a one star restaurant. The Shammi Kebabs, ground lamb with cinnamon, chili, garlic and mint chutney and the dessert of carrot halwas with fennel and ginger ice cream were definitely of one star quality. The tiger prawns with ginger yogurt, paprika, and ajwain and the black lentils with kidney beans, channa dal and green chillies were very good. The Parsi chicken cutlet did not measure up to the other dishes. The food was very good and not quite like the food one gets in India; it is more unusual and refined and less spicy. With a nice bottle of red wine that complemented the food very well our dinner was 95£. There was another highly recommended place called Amaya that has even more inventive Indian cuisine, but they opened too late for lunch so we were unable to try it.

Now for the lunches:

Our best lunch and a great value was at Aubergine. The substantial three course lunch with many choices is 34£ and it includes a half-bottle of wine. When wine is included in the price it is usually of questionable quality. But not here. We had a half bottle of a 2001 Pessac Leognan which I gave a star and a half, and a half-bottle of 1999 Domaine les Aurelles from the Languedoc which was worth a star. The white wines, by their labels, looked equally impressive. We had duck confit, pheasant with *foie gras*, roasted cod with lentils, and lamb. Everything was superb,

and the lamb was exceptional. So were the two desserts. Along with *amuse-bouches*, *petits-fours*, and coffee and tip the cost for two of us was 76.50£.

A very close second was our lunch at Tom Aikens where three courses are 29£. Again everything we had was outstanding and the vegetables and flowers with Jabugo ham, salmon and goat cheese, the red mullet, and the venison were exceptional. A huge selection of 8-10 excellent *petits-fours* was served with the coffee. The staff in the dining room was all French and the cheese selection was also exclusively French. Cost with three glasses of wine was 91£. The quality of the food and the service was virtually the same as Aubergine; it just was not quite as good a value. Both places have well deserved Michelin stars.

Although it is a very upscale and expensive dim sum place, Yauatcha has only one fork and spoon in the Michelin guide, but it does have a star. I believe it has the same ownership as Hakkasan, and the food is just as unique. We had seven items and they all rated a star in my book. It was truly a great meal and I don't know that I have ever had better and more interesting dim sum. Jasmine green tea was our beverage and the cost was a whopping 57.30£, but it was worth every cent. The place is a great success so you have to book well in advance to get the time you want.

The other three lunches were all Chinese and I will mention them in the order of our preferences.

Four Seasons has the reputation of having poor service and being very crowded, but because there is no matinee on Monday we went at 2:00 PM and the place was not even full and the service was excellent. The specialty here is the roast duck. The portion was copious and it was fabulous duck. Duck does not get much better than this. There was also a great vegetable dish of Chinese broccoli and we also added deep fried seaweed as a starter. With tip the cost was 30£, and I would recommend it very highly. 84 Queensway, W2 3RL; tel 020 7229 4300; open Monday to Sunday noon till 11:15 (Sun. 10:45); nearest Tube Bayswater.

Hong Kong Diner, also called HK Diner is another simple place lacking atmosphere, but the food was terrific. We had tom yam soup, Chinese broccoli with ginger and wine sauce, chicken with chili and black beans and finally crispy duck. All of the dishes were quite good. The broccoli was perhaps better than the place above, but the duck was not nearly as good. Cost was 32.20£. 22 Wardour St., W1 D6QQ; tel. 020 7434 9544; nearest Tube Tottenham Court Road.

The third place was Royal China located at 24-26 Baker Street. We had six dim sum plates plus a noodle dish with vegetables. The food was good and very fresh, but not up to the quality of the other two places. In correspondence with the person that recommended all three of these places, I think we may not have ordered the right items, so it may be worth another try. It is much more upscale than the above two, but cost was less at only 25.75£. 24-26 Baker St. W1M 1DA; tel 020 7487 4688; nearest Tube Baker Street.