

Eating out

Michelin starred chefs Gary Rhodes and Atul Kochhar battled it out to cook for the Queen in TV's *The Great British Menu*, but Nicholas Jones was the clear winner when he visited both their restaurants last month

RHODES W1

I've eaten Gary Rhodes' food before, and, like so many others, I am a big fan. However, it had been too long since I had last eaten in one of his restaurants, so dinner at arguably his swankiest venue, Rhodes W1 at The Cumberland Hotel near Marble Arch, was something I had been looking forward to a great deal.

Although he's not actually cooking here every night, having left control of the kitchen in the capable hands of head chef Paul Welburn, this particular wing of Rhodes' culinary empire has got his hallmarks all over it. I'm talking about the focus and precision of the whole dining experience here. Rhodes has a fastidious attention to detail: everything has to be perfect, from the glassware to the miniature silver salt 'baths' on the tables. It's slick, it's pretty and it is a thoroughly enjoyable experience from start to finish for anyone who loves fine dining.

A moist chicken terrine got things underway, followed by a plate of squash gnocchi. Two fish dishes - pan-fried fish with stuffed squid and steamed halibut with a miniature Mediterranean salad - came next. A rich duck course with a stunning jus then preceded a shot of refreshing pineapple and Malibu sorbet, which in turn prepared us for a wonderful selection of French and British cheeses with truffle infused honey. It was fantastic stuff. A decadent chocolate wafer stacked dessert and coffee concluded a masterclass in Classical French cooking with a British twist. It was as immaculate a dining experience as you could hope to find, and the ideal expression of the man himself - Gary Rhodes, ladies and gentlemen, the culinary perfectionist.



Dinner for two including wine and service costs approximately £165. Rhodes W1, Great Cumberland Place, W1H 7DL; 020 7479 3895 (Rhodes W1 pictured below left)

BENARES

I've been trying to engineer an opportunity to review celebrity chef Atul Kochhar's legendary high end Indian restaurant on Berkeley Square for years now, but for one reason or another I had never made it down to Benares for dinner before. Thankfully, the moment finally arrived last month when I was invited down to eat the new 'grazing menu', several courses of pure nirvana on a plate. Despite its delicate nouvelle appearance, the 'grazing menu' is quite a feast. This is Indian food alright, but a huge departure from your local Tandoori take away.

After a quick cocktail we were soon into the first course, featuring a delicate salad of five spice pickled prawns, a lobster 'prawn cocktail' and a delicate slab of duck terrine with crisp fennel bread. It was a terrific opening gambit, but things were to get better still as three plates of the utmost quality followed. Some brilliant battered fish goujons were accompanied by crushed peas and a punchy spiced chutney that danced around your tongue. We then moved on to the Cilantro Chicken, served with a scoop of beautifully moist Biryani rice and a wonderful tomato relish, bursting with unctuous spice and flavour. As if that wasn't enough in the way of brilliant flavour combinations, four tender slices of lamb served on a bed of equally tender chick peas, infused with rosemary and Indian spice, left us waxing lyrical about 'the great meals', and where this one ranked in the top ten of all time. It's been a good month for me, it really has.

As this is posh Indian grub, your local curry house lager makes way for matched wines, and the combination really worked here. A trio of small, but perfectly formed desserts concluded proceedings. Some lavender scented steamed yoghurt cake smoothed my palate, a shot glass of banana sorbet tempered the lingering spice and a deliciously sticky brownie left us feeling all warm and gooey inside as we set off for home. It was an inspired menu and well worth the wait.

Dinner for two with matched wine costs approximately £150 including service. Benares, 12a Berkeley Square House, Berkeley Square, W1J 6BS; 020 7629 8886. Check out more of Nicholas' reviews at www.nickeatsaround.com (Benares pic top)