

From The Times

February 6, 2009

The foodie revolution in Birmingham

There is something happening in food in Birmingham. Britain's second city now boasts three Michelin stars



Alex Renton

There is something happening in food in Birmingham. Wandering through the grey winter streets and underpasses, this is not immediately obvious to me: at the moment, recession bargains are the city's most eye-catching food fashion.

"A curry and a pint for £4.95" say the boards outside the pubs, some of whose landlords went on a march recently to protest that high rents, depressed customers and the price of beer were putting them out of business. The pub-bistro chain All Bar One is offering everything on its menu for a fiver and McDonald's has dropped the price of a double cheeseburger to £1.29.

Yet two weeks ago Birmingham gained two more Michelin stars, both of them for small, new restaurants whose prices won't terrify the credit-crunched - indeed, at Richard Turner's lovely, pocket-sized restaurant in Harborne High Street, I had the cheapest Michelin-starred lunch available on this planet.

Brum now has a grand total of three medals from the man with the spare tyres. "Only three!" you Londoners sneer - but that is more than any other English provincial city. It is a real triumph: Michelin generally favours the grand and the established, preferably in five-star hotels or bijou market towns in the shires.

And Birmingham, for all its boasted cultural revival, is neither posh nor charming. To any outsider - and, coming from Edinburgh, like me, you feel pretty alien at the Bull Ring - the city remains a poem in concrete to the death of industry and the rise of consumerism: brash, grey, blighted by cars and big box supermarkets. It is not a culinary desert; this is where the balti was invented, and in a restaurant such as Lasan, in the city's Jewellery Quarter, you can eat some of the most inventive contemporary Indian food in Britain. But Michelin dining is predominantly white and refined: it has never been what you would naturally come to the West Midlands for.

The Solihull-born author Imogen Edwards-Jones wrote a novel, *Shagpile*, about growing up in there in the late Seventies - a time when quiche Lorraine, rings of avocado mousse and diet pills reigned. "We'd go out to eat as a family maybe three times a year," she says. "Italian was the thing, and spaghetti carbonara was very daring. But my father would always order fishcakes. We used to go to a Greek restaurant in Stratford: I remember watching the customers secretly spitting out the olives. So when Kentucky Fried Chicken arrived when I was 12 or so it was the most exciting thing ever."

As a young reporter in Birmingham 20 years ago, Paul Fulford, now restaurant critic for the Birmingham Mail, remembers a similar void. "Yes, a Greek restaurant was the pinnacle of fine dining in those days," he says. "Eating well wasn't easy if you didn't have much money. We used to go to this place for steaks. They were offered with a choice of sauces: red or brown."

So what happened? Most people put the change down to one man, the chef Andreas Antona, who set up in the city 16 years ago after stints at The Ritz and The Dorchester in London. "He is the godfather of modern Birmingham food," says Fulford.

Birmingham lads who trained under him at the Plough and Horses Hotel in Edgbaston are now the stars of the region's restaurant circuit. His arrival coincided with Birmingham's post-Thatcher reinvention of itself as a convention centre. Suddenly there was a sophisticated audience from outside looking for something to eat.

Antona is now to be found governing Birmingham's food and tourism college; he is also "chef-patron" of Simpsons, probably the best-known smart restaurant in the city. It looks curiously like Fawcety Towers on the outside, but with Luke Tipping as its executive chef it got the city's first Michelin star three years ago. Simpson's is a fine, fairly traditional restaurant that promises on its website: "Tasting the best of France - in Birmingham!" A cruel back-hander if ever I saw one.

The most interesting and successful of Antona's former disciples is Glynn Purnell. It's around him that Birmingham's new culinary buzz is concentrated. Only 34, a Brummie born and raised, he's won a Michelin twice: at the defunct Jessica's and now with his own place, Purnell's, in the city centre. I worked my way through his tasting menu there a few weeks ago and emerged entertained and delighted.

Purnell is a jokey, rabbit-out-of-a-hat chef, clearly influenced by Heston Blumenthal: his best-known dish is a "smoked haddock milk foam" encircling a poached egg yolk, sprinkled with cornflakes. It's a memory of childhood, he says: his mother would boil haddock in milk and he, always hungry, used to fill his pockets with cereal before going to school.

Purnell has a childlike delight in taste surprises - luckily, they seem to work. Venison in a gravy of burnt liquorice did. But I liked best a perfect cube of goat's cheese mousse, topped with a square of reduced pineapple jelly: a comical nod to Seventies wine-and-cheese parties. When Blumenthal visited the restaurant a few weeks ago, he commented that the food had put a smile on his face. "That's the nicest thing a chef has ever said to me," Purnell says.

It was impressive, on a glum midweek January night in Birmingham's financial district, that Purnell's was almost full - and you can't get a weekend booking there till March. Purnell hopes that keen pricing, and of course the Michelin star, will keep the place going through the recession.

The restaurant has no backers: it is funded entirely by Purnell, his wife and the bank manager. But Birmingham will take care of him, he believes: "I'm flying the flag for the city and I think people appreciate that and want to support it." What's next? "Well, once you've got one Michelin star, that's when the hard work starts."

On the street, though, you feel that turning Birmingham's food culture round may still take more work. The city lacks an awful lot that we Edinburghers take for granted - there are few independent grocers and butchers, for a start. Locally sourced food is still just a rumour.

There's no chapter of those Jehovah's Witnesses of ethical nutrition, the Slow Food movement, and the more affluent west of the city can boast only one organic grocer/deli, OHO. This is uncomfortably sandwiched between a charity shop and a Sainsbury Local in Harborne, "Birmingham's Kensington".

Its friendly co-owner, Anthony McCann, told me that he would be in trouble if local people didn't support OHO. "They talk the talk about wanting local independent shops, but then you see them driving their 4x4s into Waitrose car park. Birmingham's always been a few years behind."

A few yards away is the eponymous restaurant of another Brummie chef, the 38-year-old Richard Turner. It was doing a decent trade at lunchtime on a Wednesday when I visited: hardly surprising, since the two-

course set lunch was only £13.50. It included an exquisite saddle of lamb with sweetbreads and smoked mashed potato. Could he really make the business roll at that sort of price?

“Well, we have to set out our stall, be accessible and not put people off. I never wanted to run a restaurant where people felt uncomfortable. The days of temples of gastronomy are gone.” The Michelin star, though, has been a blessing after 18 months' slog since opening. “The morning after the news broke, I had 24 phone messages, all inquiries and bookings.”

Is Birmingham really ready for a food revolution? “It needs it,” Turner says. “You can't get decent sushi here. You can't get Vietnamese. Up until six years ago, Birmingham didn't really have anything.”

Is it the place or the people? “Well,” he laughs, “you do get the young guy who will pull up in a brand new BMW M3, with the girlfriend in the furs and the boots and the Gucci, and they'll come in, look at a menu, and go: ‘£20 for dinner? That's a bit steep!’ It's a problem. But you've got to cook for your customers.”

[Contact our advertising team](#) for advertising and sponsorship in Times Online, The Times and The Sunday Times, or place your [advertisement](#).

Times Online Services: [Dating](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Property Search](#) | [Used Cars](#) | [Holidays](#) | [Births, Marriages, Deaths](#) | [Subscriptions](#)
News International associated websites: [Globrix Property Search](#) | [Property Finder](#) | [Milkround](#)

Copyright 2009 Times Newspapers Ltd.

This service is provided on Times Newspapers' [standard Terms and Conditions](#). Please read our [Privacy Policy](#). To inquire about a licence to reproduce material from Times Online, The Times or The Sunday Times, click [here](#). This website is published by a member of the News International Group. News International Limited, 1 Virginia St, London E98 1XY, is the holding company for the News International group and is registered in England No 81701. VAT number GB 243 8054 69.

