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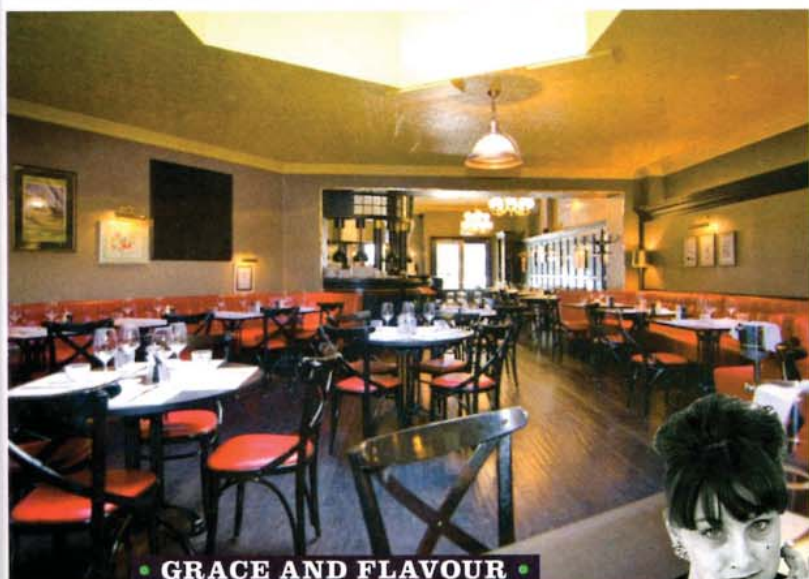
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• GRACE AND FLAVOUR •

Grace Dent is pleasantly surprised by the Mahiki team's latest outpost



As one expects from Piers Adam and Nick House (Mahiki, Whisky Mist, The Punchbowl) The Markham Inn is a vibrant place for dinner. 'Lively', one might say. OK, it's fun but bloody noisy. I had a three-piece band honking out 'Johnny Be Good' six metres from my nose as I poked through the souped-up gastropub menu. Ordering dinner during this glorious racket will test one's Marcel Marceau mime skills. Sparkling water was easy: I mimed a tap, then added jazz-hand flourishes to indicate bubbles. Just don't ask me how I communicated my starter, 'the warm tart'. Thankfully, the tart's rich, oozing, garlicky Gruyère and mushroom filling was worth my shame. Smoked mackerel pâté with beetroot was delicious but delicate – I prefer mackerel saltier with more oomph, but then I'm little more than a glorified navy.

Service at The Markham is faultless. Or perhaps waitress service everywhere is zipper when you're having dinner with David Gandy – a man paid to look melancholic in underpants for Dolce & Gabbana. We gossip about *Top Gear*, Clarkson,

David's collection of sports cars, my seven failed driving tests and David's wish that I never attempt an eighth. Hurtful. Honestly, you give one BSM instructor a nervous breakdown and you never hear the end of it. Steak frites arrived: sturdy, non-negotiable portions served on wooden boards. Seared tuna appeared on a bed of not-so-great chopped green tomato salsa. Its more challenging mystery ingredients I might have got to the bottom of had I not been distracted by a six-foot, size-zero Russian 18-year-old, in a barely there skirt and stockings, who had table-hopped to kiss a boy, which caused merry passive-aggressive hell with his girlfriend.

Puddings at The Markham are comforting: warm plum pie with vanilla ice cream, knickerbocker glory, a slab of chocolate terrine with pink sparkly sugar and a pistachio sauce. In a selfless bid to keep the chef busy, I sampled all of them. Marvellous. The Markham is a holy fuss of Chelsea faces, laughing, eating, plotting, supping, refuelling and carousing. By 11pm there's a speakeasy vibe as the band plays. You'll go for the food, but you'll go back for the atmosphere.

THE MARKHAM INN
2 Elystan Street,
SW3
(020 7581 9139)



10-MINUTE MIRACLE

Bayed Bi Hamod (Lebanese lemon and mint eggs) by Allegra McEvedy

- Serves 1
- 1 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
 - 2 cloves of garlic, sliced
 - 2 free-range eggs
 - 1 flatbread
 - a handful of mint leaves, chopped
 - lemon juice

Method
Heat the oil in a heavy-bottomed pan on a medium heat, then gently fry the garlic. Meanwhile, beat and season the eggs. Toast the flatbread – it'll take just a minute to get hot and floppy. Pour the eggs into the pan and scramble. Before they're set, stir in the mint and squeeze in the lemon juice. Spoon on to a plate with the flatbread, add more lemon juice and a sprig of mint if you're feeling fancy.

From Bought, Borrowed & Stolen: Recipes & Knives from a Travelling Chef (Conran Octopus, £25)

FOOD SPY

If you love green or black tea, book in for one of the Ippodo tea workshops running next week at So Restaurant in Soho. Ippodo is a 300-year-old tea shop in Kyoto and for the first time ever, its team of tea masters will be here to teach Londoners how to make the perfect cuppa. 11 to 13 October (sorestaurant.com)

• TOP THREE •
SUSHI

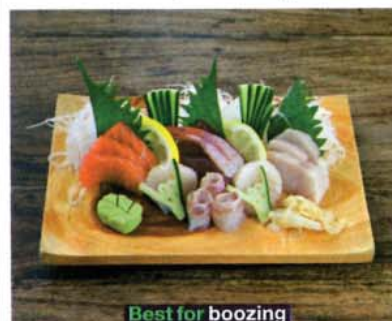


Best for people-watching

EIGHT OVER EIGHT

392 King's Road, SW3
(020 7349 9934; rickerrestaurants.com/eightovereight)

This sleek restaurant is owned by the same people as E&O and the Great Eastern Dining Room and has a similarly glamorous vibe. The cocktail bar in front of the big bustling restaurant is good for people-watching, then tuck into some excellent sushi and sashimi, as well as other pan-Asian dishes. Try the delicious seabass sashimi yuzu or the typhoon roll.



Best for boozing

AKARI

196 Essex Road, N1 (020 7226 9943; akarilondon.co.uk)

Housed in a former pub, this Japanese restaurant does a great range of sushi and sashimi, as well as hot dishes, all freshly prepared while you wait. The mackerel dishes are particularly tasty – try the saba no bo – and the scallop sashimi is delicate and sweet. Pair it all with some Japanese drinks: as it is actually an Izakaya (Japanese drinking house) there is a very good list of sake and shochu.



Best for quality

DININGS

22 Harcourt Street, W1
(020 7723 0666; dinings.co.uk)

Many of the friendly front-of-house and kitchen staff in this tiny restaurant are ex-Nobu, meaning you can get sparkling fresh sushi for a fraction of what you might pay at Nobu (although the fish isn't exactly cheap here either). Sit at the narrow bar or at a table in the polished concrete basement, and go for yellowtail with caviar, Santa Barbara shrimp or salmon with spicy taramo sauce.

• TASTE BUDDY •

MARKS & SPENCER DELI CHUNKY GUACAMOLE DIP, £2.19 for 170g ★★★

This is under-seasoned. If you add more salt, it tastes a whole lot better and becomes a really tasty guacamole.

WHOLE FOODS MARKET GUACAMOLE, £2.99 for 240g ★★★

This is really chunky, well seasoned and pretty spicy – it's great. It looks homemade and tastes very fresh with a chili bite.

ESSENTIAL WAITROSE GUACAMOLE, £2.31 for 200g ★★★

This tastes like they've added a huge amount of cream, which you don't need. It's too bland and the consistency is horrible.



Thomasina Miers, co-founder of Wahaca restaurants (wahaca.co.uk)

