

CULTURE

# London's Greatest Gastropubs

*Whether you pop in for a pint or a three-course meal, these new-school taverns boast the best of British gastronomy today.*

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By [WILL HAWKES](#)

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It's hard to imagine now, but there was a time when eating in a [London](#) pub would have seemed wilfully perverse. Before The Eagle on Farringdon Road became the first "Gastropub" in 1991, pub food in the British capital ran the gamut from basic (crisps, nuts, pickled stuff) to microwaved (everything else). Pubs were for drinking; restaurants were for foreigners. Londoners largely ate at home.

In the 1990s, Britain experienced a culinary awakening, buoyed by the arrival of a spate of game-changing restaurants—most notably the late, great Rowley Leigh's Kensington Place—and a widespread desire for better casual dining. In London, that transformation was evident in the many historical pubs that began putting food first (even if some locals grumbled about drinkers being elbowed out). But today, Londoners are less bothered by pubs' evolving identity and more concerned about their very existence. Thanks to a complex blend of factors, notably social change and planning law, pubs are shutting left and right. Any neighborhood pub is a good pub in this economy, even if it's a far cry from the sawdust-floored barrooms of yore. A lot has changed since and, on balance, mostly for the better.



16 Elia St., London N1 8DE

+44 20 7916 2920

Indian food has long been served in British pubs, particularly in England's West Midlands— where Desi Pubs, opened to feed arrivals from the Indian subcontinent in the 1970s and 80s but now beloved by all, were born—but London gastropubs have been slow to embrace the flavors of the subcontinent. Not the Tamil Crown, however, the more relaxed and pub-like offshoot of sister (brother?) restaurant The Tamil Prince. Menu showstoppers include coconut prawn moilee, a South Indian curry made with coconut milk, and robata lamb chops, marinated in masala spices and cooked over hot charcoal, plus Indian-inclined roasts on Sundays. My favorites, though, are the starters and sides— like a crispy, spidery deep-fried nest of onion bhaji, served with mint sauce, or roti bread, which flakes and melts in the mouth. Both are the perfect accompaniment to a pint of Purity ale, served here on handpump.

## The Walmer Castle

58 Ledbury Rd., W11 2AJ

+44 20 3946 9555

The Walmer Castle reopened in 2023 with a focus on food. This is the fancy end of Notting Hill, just beyond tourist-heavy Portobello Road, and the food reflects locals' love of simple, elegant European grub: a ham hock and chicken terrine is a feast for the eyes as much as the stomach, while smoked halibut with beetroot and soft-boiled egg is a balance of punchy and delicate, rustic sweetness and soft smoky flakes. Pudding (dessert to you Yanks) is an unexpected forte: on my last visit, I enjoyed sticky toffee pudding with salted caramel ice cream, a combination so sweet it sounds too much—but was actually just right.

