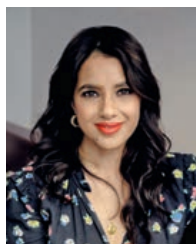




**‘Because  
sometimes  
good food  
is company  
enough’**

Chef and restaurateur *Ravinder Bhogal* reflects on the unexpected joy of dining alone, plus we've picked out the restaurants where a table for one really is the most fun



**M**y husband Nadeem and I opened a restaurant and got married at the same time. We were personally and professionally intertwined.

I cherish the life we have built, but there are times when sharing so much has tested our sanity and space. In those early, all-consuming years, when

we weren't commuting to work together, forensically taking apart our profit-and-loss sheets or working at the restaurant, we could be found exhausted, bingeing on Netflix, sleeping or eating together. You could guarantee our togetherness; wherever he went, I went. Whatever he did, I did too. Invite one of us to lunch and the other appeared. Boundaries were porous, and 'I' quickly became 'we'. Our personal taste conjoined; I no longer had a favourite restaurant – instead it was a shared 'our place'.

After six years of lonely singledom, I was grateful for this snug co-existence, especially where meals were concerned. I looked forward to restaurant dinner dates or cooking him spoiling meals – food is my love language, after all. For me, eating alone, if at all, was a lunchtime sandwich scoffed at a popular chain, or something on toast for dinner, if he was out.

It was a trip to Milan for some filming that changed things. It was too early for us both to be absent from the business, so I had to travel alone. I checked into one of those glum business hotels. As lunchtime emerged, I briefly considered the contents of the mini bar before deciding to head out. After all, Italians are celebrated for the pleasures of the table.

I found my way to Bar Luce, the whimsical café designed by film director Wes Anderson. I delighted in the Formica tables, retro pinball machine and speckled terrazzo floors in confectionery hues. I had enjoyed wandering around, getting a little lost, but the thought of dining alone felt stark. Around me, a dozen couples drank prosecco and broke bread together, while I stared joylessly at a panini with just a book for company.

As the evening drew in, it was time to eat again. This time, I walked into town and picked a trattoria for what I thought would be an in-and-out experience – a quick bowl of pasta and a glass of wine. I sat at the bar so as not to take up a table and pulled out my phone for company. Then, from across the room, I heard a woman heartily send her compliments to the chef. She too was dining alone – but her table was covered with plates of food and a half-drunk carafe of wine. She ate with gusto, lingering between bites, relishing every mouthful, smiling and bantering with the waiters. Inspired, I put away my phone, ordered a starter and a main, and made sure to leave room for dessert. As I slurped my linguine alle vongole, I enjoyed its flavour immensely, with no distraction. I was present to the briny nubs of clam meat, the garlicky oil that I swiped with tufts of bread. When it came to dessert, I revelled in not having to share the last bite.

Derek Walcott's poem *Love After Love* sums it up best: "You will love again the stranger who was your self./ Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart/ to itself, to the stranger who has loved you/ all your life, whom you ignored/ for another..." Dining alone is far from lonely or sad. When life feels fraught, a good restaurant is a source of sanctuary and self-care. Lavishing yourself with a good meal is an acknowledgement that we can – and should – treat ourselves with the kindness and love we accord others.



## FOR FRANCOPHILES Pompette, Oxford

While this stylish bistro in north Oxford is a favourite among locals for *dîner à deux*, it's also ideal for *manger seul*. You come here to be enveloped in a relaxed Gallic embrace: chef-owner Pascal Wiedemann worked with Henry Harris at Racine before opening *Terroirs* in Charing Cross, where he mastered the art of creating an unfussy sense of occasion.

The bar area is eminently suitable for solo dining, but wherever you sit there's plenty that lends itself to being eaten one-handed while reading a book: farmhouse French cheeses, terracotta-hued fish soup with rouille, truffled gnocchi. Come during *Apero Hour* for drinks and complimentary snacks, or on Thursdays for *moules frites* and a glass of wine. Otherwise a plate of ham and Manchego croquettes with an old-style Champagne cocktail ticks every box. Well, 'pompette' does mean 'tipsy' in French... *Starters from £10. 7 South Parade, Summertown; [pompetterestaurant.co.uk](http://pompetterestaurant.co.uk)* »





## Ravinder's top tips

**1 EMBRACE THE CEREMONY** of eating and be fully present in the moment.

The writer Alice B Toklas said that the French bring to the table "the same appreciation, respect, intelligence and lively interest that they have for the other arts, for painting, for literature and for the theatre".

**2 AVOID USING YOUR PHONE AS A CRUTCH.** Put it away and people-watch instead. Chance meetings and conversations at restaurants can be fulfilling – the diner sitting next door may be a new BFF or collaborator for a new venture.

**3 TAKE A BAR OR COUNTER SEAT.** These are virtually made for solo diners. In my experience, bartenders have the best recommendations and great chat. If you do want to sit at a table, try going for lunch or off-peak, or find a restaurant with communal dining or a chef's table where you have the added benefit of striking up a conversation with others.

**4 TAKE A BOOK OR MAGAZINE** if you'd rather be left alone. You're less likely to be disturbed by over-eager waiters if you're absorbed in a good book.





**‘Brutalist architecture, concrete walls and striking photography attract a creative crowd – and the chips are standout’**



## **FOR THE ARTY CROWD**

**Toklas, London**

From the founders of the Frieze art fair and magazine, Toklas (named after cookbook writer Alice B Toklas) attracts creative types with its brutalist architecture, concrete walls and striking Wolfgang Tillmans photography. When it's not hosting gallery launches and fashion parties, the restaurant serves elegant dishes focused on seafood and vegetables. Citrus features prominently in mains such as monkfish crudo with caviar-like finger lime, while the grill packs flavour into Cornish brill with clams and soft, buttery leeks. The chips are standout, and it's practically criminal not to order the sourdough. It's made in next-door Toklas Bakery, which also sells exemplary pastries and hand-stretched pizza.

*Small plates from £8. 1 Surrey St, London WC2; [toklaslondon.com](http://toklaslondon.com) »*

WORDS LAURA PRICE PHOTOGRAPHS CLARE LEWINGTON





## FOR THE PEOPLE WATCHERS

### Friends of Ham, Leeds

Considering its location on the newly pedestrianised main route out of Leeds train station, Friends of Ham is a surprisingly elegant place to eat. It has enough taps to please any beer enthusiast, a carefully curated by-the-glass wine list and does a mean cornichon negroni, but – as the name suggests – they’re really into their charcuterie here.

Ask for a seat in the full-height front window to enjoy some of the finest people-watching in Yorkshire while you choose: the build-your-own boards make self-indulgence a necessity. Once you’ve picked some smoky Spanish salami, a nutty, cave-aged treasure of a cheese and perhaps a bitter-leaved winter salad to go alongside it, the knowledgeable bar staff will happily recommend a drink to complement them. Linger as long as you like: there’s Leeds-made vanilla ice cream from Northern Bloc in the affogato, but don’t feel shy about ordering more cheese instead. And if you over-order, you can always ask for a doggy bag. *Board ingredients from £4. 4-8 New Station Street, Leeds; [friendsofham.com](http://friendsofham.com)*

WORDS ASHLEIGH ARNOTT PHOTOGRAPHS CLAUDIA LAW



## FOR COUNTRYSIDE LOVERS

Crocadon, Saltash, Cornwall

Deep in the heart of Cornwall, Crocadon Farm might be the platonic ideal of a modern British agriturismo. Chef-founder Dan Cox left London to set up his ‘soil-centric’ estate in 2017, and his Herculean efforts have paid dividends. The 120-acre farm is now a self-sustaining and thrillingly wild mishmash of pasture, blossoming orchards and hedgerows, overflowing veg patches, glasshouses full of esoteric edibles and tumbledown farm buildings – with a beautifully designed restaurant and bakery at its heart.

Almost everything in immediate season appears on Dan’s meticulous, multi-course menus, from rare-breed sheep to Tamar Valley pears, blackthorn, sweet chestnut and ramsons. The intricacy of these (plus a self-guided amble around the estate) is a perfect focus for solo diners keen to immerse themselves in Dan’s holistic vision, whether at the oak kitchen counter or small tables with fine views of the bustling hobs and pass.

*Menus from £45. St Mellion, Saltash; crocadon.farm*

WORDS TOM HOWELLS PHOTOGRAPHS REBECCA DICKSON



‘Almost everything in immediate season appears on the meticulous menu’



WORDS JOHANNA DERRY-HALL

## FOR NOT-FOR-SHARING FANS

Gloriosa, Glasgow

“I don’t know why we all call them sharing plates,” says Rosie Healey, head chef at Glasgow restaurant Gloriosa. “In Europe, they’re just dishes that highlight one ingredient.” So while it’s true that Gloriosa’s menu is mostly a mix of smaller and larger plates, they don’t have to be shared to be enjoyed. Far from it.

Gloriosa’s warm service, spacious seating, large windows, low lighting and gentle jazz make it an easy and

unselfconscious place to dine solo.

The menu takes inspiration from the Mediterranean (“in the sense that the flavours are bright,” says Rosie), changing to reflect what’s local and seasonal. Small tables by the window feel tucked away while offering a view across the space, so you can enjoy a couple of plates while reading, or people-watch inconspicuously. *Small plates from £6. 1321 Argyle St, Glasgow; gloriosaglasgow.com »*





## FOR FRESH FISH Street Urchin, Manchester

Hospitality begins early at Street Urchin: staff send the menus to your inbox a few hours ahead of time. Describing itself as an ‘English market diner’, the restaurant serves a wide range of dishes made with local farm produce: think generous cuts of seared venison loin or miso-marinated aubergine. The highlight, though, is the seafood – chef Kevin Choudhary is the son of a fisherman and makes a cracking bisque or chalk stream trout ceviche.

On the fringes of Ancoats, a vibrant foodie neighbourhood with an industrial history, Street Urchin’s name evokes the area’s downtrodden past. Enjoy a secluded meal in one of the low-lit nooks or watch the buzz from the mezzanine. *Small plates from £9.50. 72 Great Ancoats St, Manchester; street-urchin.co.uk*

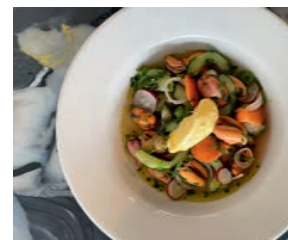
WORDS CHLOE VIALOU-CLARK

## BEST BAR STOOLS



### KOYA CITY, LONDON

The second of Japanese-British chef Shuko Oda’s trio of chic noodle bars is one of the nicest places to dine solo, and there’s almost always space for walk-ins at the kitchen counter. Look out for weekly specials such as braised oxtail with pickles or garlicky ‘pil-pil-style’ udon. *10-12 Bloomberg Arcade, London EC4; koya.co.uk*



### DORY’S, MARGATE

Stroll straight off the beach for small plates featuring fresh local catch such as pickled silver shore herring or cured sea trout with kohlrabi. Take in the seafront view or watch from the counter as the chefs work magic with mackerel. *24 High St, Margate; angelasofmargate.com*



### DUCKSOUP, LONDON

This dinky spot serves no-frills seasonal dishes such as rabbit leg with flageolet beans alongside natural wines by the glass. Enjoy the homespun sounds from the vinyl record collection and soak up the super-convivial atmosphere at the counter-cum-bar. *41 Dean St, London W1; ducksoupsoho.co.uk*

WORDS EMMA HUGHES, LAURA PRICE, FAYE HARDY PHOTOGRAPH ANTON RODRIGUEZ