



Royal Oak

Quick London Getaways

The Crooked Billet

2 Westbrook End, Newton Longville, Milton Keynes, Bucks
Tel: 01908 373936 Price: £29

'Cooking is respecting the seasons' quotes the menu at this wonderful, easy-going pub, recently taken over by chef Emma Sexton and master sommelier John Gilchrist (ex 1837). Bold, gutsy flavours shine through the uncomplicated dishes constructed from locally sourced ingredients – fillet steak with chunky béarnaise and wedge chips – but the pièce de résistance is the wine list, a modestly priced celebration of top names, all available by the glass. Get organised, however: you may have to wait five weeks for a table.

Dove

Plum Pudding Lane, Dargate, Kent
Tel: 01227 751360 Price: £26

The very essence of an English country pub with a menu that aims straight for the heart of traditional British cooking, with some snappy

updating. Impeccably sourced local ingredients are cooked with care and consideration, producing blockbuster flavours and all-round warm feelings.

Fleur de Sel

Manleys Hill, Storrington, West Sussex
Tel: 01903 742331 Price: £40

Traditional, discreet, comfortable restaurant where Michel Peraud produces classic French cooking noted for exact timing and balanced flavours.

La Gousse D'Ail

268 Woodstock Road, Oxford
Tel: 01865 311936 Price: £51
Jonathan Wright (Raymond Blanc's former head chef) has transformed the old Lemon Tree into a gastro-

showcase for ambitiously complex cooking. Despite the wealth of ideas, he never allows the composition of dishes to become muddled. Prices are high, but an erudite wine list, smart lounge bar and suave French service are value-added extras.



Midsummer House

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Midsummer Common, Cambs
Tel: 01223 369299 Price: £48
Light, colour and contemporary design infuse this house facing the common. Food, dancing between tradition and innovation, is best summed up by pot-roast squab pigeon teamed with pommes Anna, onion tarte tatin, caramelised endive, confit garlic and jus of thyme.

Old Manor House

21 Palmerston Street, Romsey, Hants
Tel: 01794 517353 Price: £33

Mauro Bregoli has an Italian's sensuous respect for the quality of raw materials and the technique to push the fundamentals of Italian cookery to more sophisticated levels, without losing sight of the intrinsic flavour. A substantial wine list helps things slip down.

The Sportsman

Faversham Road, Seasalter, Kent
Tel: 01227 273 370 Price: £29

Trendy Whitstable is a couple of miles across the marsh flats, but in feel Seasalter is decades away - caravan parks, 1950s prefabs - a place time forgot. This seen-better-days beach pub is actually a lesson in shoestring decor - simple and very effective. But Steve Harris's sharply observed urban cooking is pulling in the crowds. Chalkboard listings are built around the day's catch and whatever catches the chef's eye; thus, wild local sea

bass with thyme and garlic, or roast sirloin of Dexter beef in a red wine sauce. The wine list is short, global and to the point.

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The Square, Yattendon, Berks
Tel: 01635 201325 Price: £36
This pub and 'restaurant with rooms' in picture postcard Yattendon has long punched above its weight, but under the meticulous stewardship of GM Corinne MacRae and new chef Jason Gladwin (ex Newbury Manor), it is right back on form after a slight dip last year. Nice modern British menu with French inflections and a heavyweight wine list.

Sir Charles Napier

Sprigg's Alley, Chinnor, Oxon
Tel: 01494 483011 Price: £39

Though nominally a pub, the down-at-heel charm owes a lot to junk shop-style furniture, eye-catching pictures, garden sculptures, winter fires and courtyard eating. Food is wide ranging – say, hock with sauerkraut, crab gratin, and spinach crêpe. High priced but high quality.

Trinity at the Crown and Castle Hotel

Orford, Near Woodbridge, Suffolk
Tel: 01394 450205 Price: £25
Relaxed, stylish surroundings from the former owners of Hintlesham Hall. Global dishes are as clean and sharp, and the wine list is user friendly.



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