

## Eating my way through London

By [Manny Gonzalez](#) (The Philippine Star) | Updated June 17, 2016 - 12:00am



Food trip: Harrod's Food Hall; (below) Simpson's on the Strand; The Wolseley, the author's favorite restaurant in London.

MANILA, Philippines - London is a very expensive city to eat in. Or breathe in. Even a mediocre Chinese restaurant will set you back £20. So if you want to save your money for Oxford Street, you'll have to exercise some restraint.

Tip #1. Find the nearest Sainsbury's. This is the leading supermarket group. But first a word of warning: Do not be tempted by what looks like fresh-cooked food like meat pies and stews. If you buy any of these you'll be sorry. Instead, stick with canned food, fresh fruit and dairy. The £3 bottles of wine are drinkable. The Coke is terrific. Trust me.

Even better, Marks & Spencer. Lots of good stuff, especially the crisps (potato chips) and digestive biscuits.





Tip #2. Wherever you are going for the day, figure out where the Pret-a-Manger branches are. There's one on every block, or so it seems. The name means "ready to eat" and is a play on the words "pret-a-porter" which means ready-to-wear (as in clothes). They offer sandwiches which are modestly-priced, about £3, and generally better than those in supermarkets. If you take some sandwiches home, you can enrich them with added mayo or Spam.

Tip #3. There are four IKEAs in Greater London. If you have been intelligent enough to choose lodgings near one, you can now reap what you have sown. All IKEAs worldwide offer really cheap breakfast and lunch, from £2 to £5.



Tip #4. Time for a little splurge. In the heart of London, Covent Garden has one of the few Shake Shacks outside the US. Good hamburgers, thick shakes, though mediocre fries. You are not the only pence-pinchers in London, and the queues can get long. Try to make it there by 11 a.m. for lunch, or 5 p.m. for dinner. About £8 per person if you split the shakes.

Tip #5. Another splurge – The Pub. Live a little and enjoy the atmosphere. English pubs serve mostly very palatable food. Depending on where you are, a reasonable main course with a small beer (say "half a lager") might run £8-15. The cheapest items on the menu will probably be bangers (sausages) and shepherd's pie – a yellow blob, made with ground mutton.

Enjoy London. Try to at least include a museum or two during your visit.



### But if you want to splurge...

It used to be that English food was universally regarded as just-god-awful. But flush investment bankers, oil sheikhs, Russian oligarchs and assorted Rich People from elsewhere have improved matters a bit.

So, here are some more tips for those who are frequent London visitors or those who are looking to splurge a little bit more.

Tip #1. Find the nearest Sainsbury's! Chocolates! Champagne! Cheddar cheese! Crackers! Coke!



High tea at the Ritz's Palm Court.

Tip #2. In bygone days, Harrod's Food Hall was the place to go for a wide range of gourmet food items. It sort of still is, but all of Harrods Department Store has become a confusing mess since it was bought by an Egyptian. There's no rhyme or reason to the layout and no useful signage, whether related to food or anything else. On my last visit it took me two and a half days to find my way out. Still, I recommend a visit, if just to admire the Egyptian escalator, which looks like how the interior of King Tut's tomb would look, if King Tut's tomb had an escalator.

I actually recommend Selfridge's Department Store, which has a much smaller and more manageable food hall, with many edibles. And it has the advantage of being on Oxford Street.



If you can spare a little time from shopping, check out London's museums. This portrait of Lady Emma Hamilton (mistress of Admiral Nelson) hangs in the Tate.



Tip #3. It will surely occur to you to try a restaurant associated with a celebrity chef. Jamie Oliver runs a few restaurants. The one I've tried and can recommend is Barbecoa, in the St. Paul's Cathedral area. Though it might seem a bit out of your way, you should really see St. Paul's. Its interior is grander and more impressive than Paris' Notre Dame or Rome's St. Peter's, and some famous people are buried there. Barbecoa is noisy and bustling. The steaks and wines-by-the-glass are good.

Gordon Ramsay manages or fronts for a whole string of diverse eateries. I didn't especially like the Savoy Grill (for many decades regarded the best restaurant in London), which had a heavy, fussy atmosphere and just average food. Instead, opt for Ramsay's Heddon Street Kitchen, which has downright cheaply-priced international selections (you can get out for £30 per head) as well as smart, modern décor. The restaurant manager was friendly.

Tip #4. Looking for the best fish and chips? Roast beef? In most people's minds, these are the two most English of dishes. Now here I'm afraid I'll have to disillusion you.

You can get decent, passable fish and chips all over town, but no outstanding fish and chips.

For the best fish and chips in the world, you will have to go to Wigan Pier, Squamish, British Columbia, which is eight time-zones away.

And as for the roast beef, there used to be a mini-chain, The Carvery, which offered all-you-can-eat roast beef, pork, lamb... and it was not only terrific, but cost just £15 (oops, that'll tell you how many years I've been going to London). But it went out of business, no doubt due to customers like me.

Simpson's on the Strand is often cited by contemporary Londoners, who evidently have no idea what they're talking about. Apart from the venerable clubby atmosphere, it's rather sorry food, by people who think "aged" beef means "rotting."

For a great roast beef that will sing Hallelujah in your mouth, you need to go to – drumroll – Plantation Bay in Cebu. I say this in all modesty. My roast beef is famous throughout the world, among the cognoscenti, from Paris to San Francisco, Hong Kong to Vancouver. We serve it every New Year, and sometimes on other occasions.

Tip #5. High Tea is served in every 5-star hotel in London and usually consists of scones and other pastries, sandwiches (including such English eccentricities as cucumber-and-watercress), clotted cream (which looks like butter but lacks the oomph; so ask for butter, French butter to be precise, and note how the waiter's attitude to you changes), and bottomless tea.

A good High Tea will obviate the need for dinner, and breakfast too, so it is not a bad investment.

Running about £60 a head, almost any High Tea will do, but the hotel venue with the most stunning décor is the Palm Court at the Ritz.

Book months in advance, and note that you have to dress up – jackets and ties required.

Final Tip. The most popular restaurant in London is of course a matter of opinion, but many Londoners (and I) would say The Wolseley, which is spitting distance from the Ritz.

Always full and slightly dark, it has a distinctive "Hogwarts" look, and good-enough food in generous quantities. About £50 a head.

Whether budget-minded or experienced, if you can only afford one really nice meal in London, this is the one I would recommend.

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