

The Saltire's blue was officially specified as Pantone 300 in 2003



THIS IS NO DEEP-FRIED MARS BAR!

It wasn't that long ago that some looked down on the idea of Scottish cuisine - but its reputation now could hardly be better. Neil Davey explores the delights of Glasgow and Edinburgh



Not your average pigeon at Timberyard in the Scottish capital

When Glasgow was named European Capital of Culture in 1990, how we laughed. Back then, thanks to Rab C Nesbitt and Russ Abbott, it was synonymous with incoherence, headbutting and drinking.

Fast forward a few years and our soft southern perception wasn't much different. When I said in 2007 that I was doing a culinary tour of Glasgow, the reaction was predictably derogatory. "Gourmet Glaswegian? Vintage Irn-Bru and a deep-fried limited edition Mars Bar?"

The truth was very different. This was a city on the rise, with a passionate population, stunning architecture and a rapidly developing food scene. There were two standouts on that trip: dinner at the Abode Hotel, where executive chef Michael Caines was encouraging his local brigade to do marvellous things with excellent Scottish produce, and a tasting of some brilliant Bavarian-style beers at WEST Brewery led by its founder, Petra Wetzel.

Seven years on, the sneers have stopped and Glasgow has a deserved reputation >>



>> SNEERING ABOUT GLASGOW HAS NOW STOPPED

>> as one of the finest foodie cities in the UK (well, in the UK at the time of writing). This trip also has the satisfying sense of things coming full circle, thanks to a knockout meal at The Gannet (which was started by two men who met while working at the Abode) and the fact that my guide for the first afternoon, after sampling all eight WEST beers on offer and some excellent German drinking food, was the aforementioned Ms Wetzell. She is the perfect person to comment on Glasgow's culinary scene, having witnessed it both as an adopted Glaswegian – she is German born but has lived here for 21 years – and as part of the culinary industry.

"When I was 19, I started studying at Glasgow University," Petra explains. "My dad came to visit, and said: 'What's the Glasgow lager?' I bought him a Tennent's, he tried it and said: 'We're not drinking that again!'" Over the next decade, from that inspiration came the decision to brew their own beers. "We were the first business to pitch on Dragon's Den! They thought nobody would drink German beers in Scotland," she adds. "Boy, have we proved them wrong."

And how. If you can find a single decent establishment in the city that doesn't stock at least one WEST beer, I'd be very surprised. This success is down to both quality – the St Mungo (named after Glasgow's patron saint) is probably my favourite lager – and Petra's zeal: a local restaurateur smiles and tells me he and his colleagues refer to it as "being Petra-fied".

"When I first arrived, mum and dad would say: 'Do they not have salt and pepper?' Everything was bland. Now I could



name 20 great restaurants in Glasgow."

While it's not all good news – "So many burger places! What is it with burgers?" – Petra is proud of her adopted home.

"Look at Argyle Street. When I moved here, it was run-down tenement buildings and closed shops. Now there's The Gannet, the Kelvingrove Café, Crabshakk, Mother India, The Finniestone... within 300 yards, you have some of the best eateries in Glasgow in a street that, ten years ago, nobody in their right mind would have chosen to walk down."



BLYTHSWOOD SQUARE

11 Blythswood Square,
townhousecompany.com

Yes, it's a hotel restaurant – but what a hotel restaurant. It adeptly straddles the traditional and the modern, celebrating local ingredients. For anyone who doubts that, here are four words to consider: "Scottish beef, Jospet Grill." And if that doesn't work, consider Hebridean prawns and that same charcoal-fired cooking method. To finish, there's camomile tea sorbet.



GLASGOW



BABU BOMBAY STREET KITCHEN

186 West Regent Street,
babu-kitchen.com

Glasgow's relationship with Indian food led to the invention of chicken tikka masala. The mantle now passes to Babu, which sells brilliant, great value heat-at-home takeaways and vibrant lunch snacks. It's an absolutely wonderful hybrid of Indo-Scottish culture – much better than CTM.

THE GANNET

1155 Argyle Street,
thegannetgla.com

"Modern, seasonal, Scottish" is the tagline of this bang on the money restaurant. Cooking is faultless, ingredients impeccable, and there's the occasional twist – scallops with raw peas and confit chicken wing, for example.



EDINBURGH

TIMBERYARD

Lady Lawson Street, timberyard.co

According to its website, Timberyard is "aware of sustainability and the environment... Ingredients supplied by small, local, artisan growers, breeders, producers, suppliers & foragers". If that makes it sound a little pretentious, perhaps it is, but someone here can REALLY cook. And yes, as you'd probably worked out, it's in a former timberyard.

foodism



21212

3 Royal Terrace,
21212restaurant.co.uk

There's very little conventional about Paul Kitching's cooking – and in the wrong hands, hybrid dishes such as Johnson's cauliflower cheese (which features risotto, black pudding, apple and walnuts and Branston) could be disastrous. In Kitching's, they're delicious. The name refers to the menu options – two choices, one choice, two choices, etc.

BISTRO MODERNE

15 North West Circus Place,
bistromoderne.co.uk

The ethos of a French bistro, the best ingredients from Scotland and the brilliance of Mark Greenaway. It's ludicrously good value (three-course lunch for £15, anyone?), gleefully playful, and the drinks list includes experimental offerings.

Together with her husband Victor, Carina has been part of Edinburgh's restaurant scene for several years, first at Centotre (recently renamed Contini Ristorante) in the New Town, and more recently – in a perfect hybrid of the couple's Scottish-Italian roots – at Contini Caffè, which offers its visitors both gelato and a porridge bar.

As it happens, the caffè is at the centre of the Contini Venn diagram, the other side being the Scottish Cafe, their award-winning restaurant under the National Gallery of Scotland, where Carina is taking local to a whole new level. Herbs come from just outside the door, as many of the vegetables as possible are from their acre of kitchen garden a few miles away "and we buy from 70 artisan suppliers every week", she adds. The next step will be their own honey.

"We lost our food culture for a wee while," Carina declares. "But we got it back, and the speed it's moved on from deep-fried Mars Bars to now..." She smiles. "We've got scallops, the best beef, our venison is second to none, grouse, raspberries, artisan cheeses... As an Italian, I've been brought up eating great food. We'd get fish from the harbour half a mile away, fry it in pig fat from half a mile the other way, the potatoes came from the farm which was five seconds away. It was quality, it was simple, and we've just tried to maintain that. We've got so much here that we don't have to look too far to get hold of things."

So which city is best? At the moment, for its sheer energy and vibe, I'm saying Glasgow – but don't be surprised if that changes in a year or two. Whatever happens (and whether or not you end up needing to flash your passport to visit an independent Scotland) – the real winners in this culinary battle are, happily for us, the diners. |

PARKLIFE: Glasgow's Kelvingrove Park was designed by Sir Joseph Paxton, who was also responsible for the Crystal Palace in London.

