

Opinion **FT Magazine**

Nicholas Lander's best restaurants of 2019

'In 2020, restaurateurs must offer the hospitality many of us crave'

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Bon Bon

Nicholas Lander DECEMBER 12 2019

Over the years, the question readers have most often asked is: “What is your favourite restaurant?” In 2019, that question changed to: “What do you believe will be the next trend in restaurants?”

No doubt this shift reflects growing confidence among FT readers. Everyone is a food expert these days and many are searching for something extra.

Indeed, with the world in such a troubled state, I suspect customers seek solace in restaurants where they feel extra special. I have not forgotten the experience of one restaurateur after 9/11 in [New York](#).

Although business dropped off initially, it quickly bounced back. His customers needed the comfort, he said, the camaraderie, the warmth that sharing food in a restaurant can provide.



Eating at Marisqueira, a seafood restaurant on the outskirts of Porto, was a memorable experience

So, I would recommend that chefs and restaurateurs stop searching for exotic foodstuffs and concentrate instead on training their staff to look after their customers really well.

This year, I have enjoyed some memorably hospitable experiences. My first in 2019 took place at new year over lunch at [Marisqueira](#), a seafood restaurant on the outskirts of Porto. The spider crab — full of creamy, slightly spiced crabmeat — and the octopus with octopus rice may have been the highlights of what we ate but I will never forget Manuel, our waiter.

He possesses all the essential qualities for his profession: an interest in his customers, a smile, a sense of humour and, above all, a willingness to please. My experience at [Petit Comitè](#), in Barcelona, was no less happy, not least because of Melani Sevilla, the charming general manager.



These are five good reasons to eat and drink at Amarante

Fine hospitality was also to be found in Paris and Brussels — from that increasingly rare individual, the chef/proprietor. Christophe Philippe writes on his website: “To avoid any mistakes, this restaurant is for you if you like your meat with a little fat on it, if you enjoy your fish and meat not overcooked, if you like butter, if you have a healthy appetite, and if you don’t enjoy Coca-Cola.” These are five good reasons to eat and drink at [Amarante](#) in [Paris](#).

By contrast, at [Bon Bon](#) in Brussels, where Christophe Hardiquet has been cooking for almost as long as Philippe (20 years compared with the latter’s 26), the footwear is important. Staff wear white trainers, which is “a way of bringing informality into my restaurant”, Hardiquet explained. In both restaurants, the cooking is of the highest calibre. So, too, is the hospitality.



Fhior in Edinburgh, where married couple Scott and Laura Smith cook in apparent harmony

Historically, such convivial warmth has often been generated by married couples. This summer, I discovered two couples in Edinburgh doing just that. Within the tiny confines of [The Little Chartroom](#), chef Roberta Hall-McCarron works happily alongside her husband Shaun, while, a mile away, Scott and Laura Smith cook in apparent harmony at **Fhior** (Gaelic for “true”). Both places, incidentally, serve excellent bread.

Harmonious couples can also be found in [London](#) — at [Caractère](#), for example, where Emily Roux works alongside her husband Diego Ferrari. It’s more than six months since I was there, but I am still relishing the taste of their rhubarb “arlettes” millefeuille, enriched with cinnamon.



Bo Tree Kitchen serves exceptional food

But, of course, it's not just married couples who create friendly places. There is equal warmth at the **Bo Tree Kitchen**, in Belfast, for example, where Helen O'Malley leads a young front-of-house brigade serving the exceptional food cooked by her ex-husband Suthat.

In **Tokyo**, it was delightful to watch Shinichiro Harakawa cooking alongside French-born chef Jérôme Waag at **The Blind Donkey**. Here were two veteran chefs working side by side, clearly still enjoying themselves and giving such pleasure to their customers.

Meanwhile, **Le Soufflot** in Burgundy has the combination of Charles Bufane's affability and Jérémy Pezé's food to recommend it, not to mention the least expensive wine list possibly anywhere. Most recently, the partnership between chef Jonny Lake and sommelier Isa Bal at **Trivet**, in south London, made for an exciting, memorable and very friendly meal.



'It was delightful to watch Shinichiro Harakawa (above) cooking alongside French-born chef Jérôme Waag at the Blind Donkey'

All these places make customers feel extra special but, to satisfy the widest public in 2020 and beyond, other restaurateurs will have to focus not just on what is served but how it is served — and to offer the hospitality many of us crave.

Contacts

Marisqueira amarisqueiradematosinhos.com

Petit Comitè petitcomite.cat/en

Amarante amarante.paris

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The Little Chartroom thelittlechartroom.com

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Le Soufflot restaurant-meursault.fr

Trivet trivetrestaurant.co.uk

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