

Why Giles Coren has got Birmingham's food scene all wrong

The Times restaurant critic said Birmingham's restaurants were 'a bit rubbish'. The editor of Dine Birmingham begs to differ ...

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On Thursday, there was a rerun of the media's oldest food fight, starring its favourite protagonist. The BBC published a story about the Times restaurant critic Giles Coren slating food outside London. "Honestly, if I'm going out of London to eat, it's more productive to leave the country," he moaned.

Getting needlessly and cruelly specific, he went on to say that Birmingham was "just a bit rubbish". Same for poor old Leeds, while Liverpool "was worse". Oh dear. Cue a Twitter storm from angry Brummies taking exception, myself included.

Coren went some way to mollify the situation, tweeting: "My tedious remarks about regional eating were not meant as an opinion. They were taken from an email to a BBC hack explaining why I was not qualified to comment on Brum's food scene. Why he decided to make my boring fob-offs to him the actual story is quite beyond me."

It might have been a private conversation, but these things get to us in the regions, and with good reason. London still takes the lion's share of media attention, while many notable things are happening elsewhere. Against a background where chefs and restaurateurs the country over are doing splendid things and being ignored, this kind of casual dismissal hurts.

Speaking for Birmingham, we have more Michelin-starred restaurants than any other English city outside the capital: Adam's, Purnell's, Simpsons and Turners. But, as elsewhere, the trend here is moving towards casual and friendly dining - the city's jovial warmth is its secret ingredient, second only to the quality of the food.

The Balti Triangle remains a big attraction, but it is no longer the star of the show. Raj Rana founded Indian restaurant Itihaas 10 years ago. He told me how a decade has transformed the city's restaurant scene: "Expectations have risen. There is a demand for individuality and independents. The city is known for its Indian restaurants, but we've evolved towards a focus on fine dining.

The days of curry and a pint are behind us.”

The rise in food festivals further demonstrates this burgeoning restaurant scene. If Coren fancies coming to town in September, I'd be happy to take him along to the annual Birmingham Independent Food Fair, to show off the city's homegrown gastronomy in one hit.

But, actually, any time you visit Birmingham - just an hour and a half from London, Giles - you'd do well to try any of these.

For international cuisine

The simple and authentic Ethiopian restaurant Blue Nile on Great Hampton Street serves treats from the Horn of Africa at rock-bottom prices. Bodega (which has a sister restaurant in Worcester) dishes up addictive burritos, Brazilian stews and other excellent Latin American dishes. Bizarre and brilliant in equal measure, the Karczma on Bordesley Street is your best bet for Polish pierogi.

For friendly fine dining

The more relaxed atmosphere is apparent at the likes of Carters of Moseley. But the casual approach isn't applied in the kitchen, with chefs sending out excellent examples of modern British cuisine. A particular favourite is roast red deer with squash and quince.

For vegetarians

Bohemian bolthole the Warehouse Cafe is another hidden treasure. Their veggie creations have seduced committed carnivores from - yes - that there London. Observer Food Monthly, the Independent and the Metro have all included the place in best restaurant lists over the years. Meanwhile, upmarket Bistro 1847 aims at the gourmet herbivore - spiced squash ballotine, anyone?

For street food

Three years ago, street food in Birmingham meant a bag of greasy chips from a grumpy vendor. Now, artisan outfits such as burger team Original Patty Men rank as rock stars. At weekly street food gigs such as the Digbeth Dining Club, fans form queues to get their fix of Caribbean scallops or grilled pheasant toastie.

For pub grub

My personal favourite is the Plough, found in the quaint Victorian suburb of Harborne. The stone-baked pizzas are excellent, the burgers are irresistible and the cosy atmosphere is beguiling.

For something wetter

Fox News viewers note: for a city that's "100% Muslim", Birmingham is home to a dizzying array of bars. Craft beer enthusiasts congregate at Pure Bar and Kitchen, a tasty collaboration between Purity Brewing Co and Simpsons. Brummies also love a dram – the Whisky Birmingham festival has tripled in size and is now England's biggest outside London. Wine lovers can taste their way through top slosh at Loki Wine, while kitsch Victorian pub the Jekyll and Hyde stocks locally distilled Langley's among its many gins.

And if you come along and still find you'd prefer to dine abroad, Giles, our airport is at your disposal.

Ahmed Ahmed is editor of food and drink guide Dine Birmingham.

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