
For a real taste of summer, there's nothing better than a restaurant meal eaten al fresco. Rachel Walker finds the UK's hot spots for making the most of the sun

It's fitting that the term al fresco isn't English, because the concept isn't either. It's such a rare activity, we pilfered the Italian phrase rather than make up our own.

Britain doesn't really have a strong culinary tradition of outdoor eating, so at the first glimmer of sunshine, we fumble around and appropriate others. Negronis are mixed, antipasti platters are arranged and wood-smoke ovens fired up. But all too often, efforts to replicate holidays when we're back at home are thwarted by the reality of the British summer.

While cafe tables happily spill onto the streets on the Continent, British restaurants rightly approach al fresco dining with a bit more caution. One thing they all have in common is a contingency plan. It's no small investment arranging patio heaters, strong awnings and covered pergolas that you can quickly wheel a barbecue under when the heavens open, but those who get it right reap the benefits.

There's no doubt that Britain's restaurant scene is more creative than ever and the freedom opens up a world of outdoor-dining possibilities. From pizza perched on hay bales under a Welsh tepee, to Italian dishes in a Cornish vineyard and a woodland gin bar in Dundee, the al fresco scene is more inventive than ever.



The great outdoors



Open-doors policy, from far left The Plough, Birmingham; dishes at Appleton's at the Vineyard, near Padstow, Cornwall

kitchen does a great Sunday roast (from £14), and there are few better places to enjoy a jug of Pimm's over a sunny weekend in London.
thespaniardshampstead.co.uk

WEST AND SOUTHWEST ROSSINI AT THE LEATHERNE BOTTLE

Goring-on-Thames, Oxfordshire

This place is a dining dichotomy: service is slow, but utterly charming; the setting on the Thames is quintessentially British, yet the food is some of the most authentic Italian about. Watching swans and sailboats cruise past helps to pass the time until the food arrives. Linguine all'aragosta (£15) comes on a huge hand-painted platter and is topped with half a lobster. Portion sizes are generous and dishes are served with a flourish, making it both excellent value and eccentric.

leathernebottle.co.uk

CHERWELL BOATHOUSE Oxford

The linen-draped tables on the terrace feel more than a little Brideshead, especially with the punts gliding up and down the river and the thwack of cricket balls on willow in the background. It's a somewhat unusual location at the north end of the Oxford University Parks, but well worth the walk — not just for the storybook sense of Englishness, but the good-value weekday set lunches (£14 for two courses) and excellent puddings.

cherwellboathouse.co.uk

CHRISTCHURCH HARBOUR HOTEL Christchurch, Dorset

This hotel has a wealth of outdoor space. There's fine dining at the Jetty on the seafront, where executive chef Alex Aitken flexes his muscles with a spectacular tasting menu (£60). Inside, the Upper Deck restaurant

LONDON

CHILTERN FIREHOUSE

Marylebone, London W1

There's cutthroat competition for al fresco lunch spots in the swankier London postcodes — the sort that require dark glasses, Sobranies and chilled beaujolais: the Ivy Chelsea Garden, SW3, the champagne terrace at the Ritz, W1, Boulestin, SW1, and Scott's, W1. Yet the beautiful leafy terrace at Chiltern Firehouse pips them all at the post, thanks to Nuno Mendes's creative dishes, such as the crab-stuffed doughnuts dusted in charcoal coral (£7). It's a perfect place for basking in the sunshine and catching up on gossip. Food is available outside for weekday lunches and weekend brunches.

chilternfirehouse.com

COPPA CLUB

The City, London EC3

It's rare to find reasonably priced food in prime London locations, but this new place ticks both boxes. When the sun shines, grab a table on the south-facing terrace overlooking Tower Bridge. Italian-themed dishes range from crisp-based margherita pizza (£7.45) to tangy rhubarb panna cotta (£5.45), with a particularly good-value children's menu (£7 for three

courses and a drink). An ideal spot for eating out during the summer holiday without breaking the bank.

coppaclub.co.uk

ROCHELLE CANTEN Shoreditch, London E2

Hidden behind an old schoolyard wall in residential east London, this venue is only open for weekday breakfasts and lunches. It's worth persevering, though. Swing by the City Majestic en route (Rochelle Canteen is BYOB) and lose an afternoon in the suntrap of a garden. The chefs' ability to transform a simple pork chop or a bowl of jersey royals into something magical has made the restaurant a firm fixture in the fast churn of the Shoreditch dining scene.

arnoldandhenderson.com

THE SPANIARDS INN

Hampstead, London NW3

London beer gardens are often more concrete than green, but the Spaniards Inn is an urban oasis on the edge of Hampstead Heath. It's said that John Keats wrote Ode to a Nightingale here, and it's particularly atmospheric from a shady corner, amid the smoke haze of a Saturday barbecue. The food is more pub grub than gourmet, but the

has informal dining on the terrace. It's good for a club sandwich on a warm afternoon (£9.50), and best for a long cocktail as the sun sets.

christchurch-harbour-hotel.co.uk

HARE & HOUNDS

Bath

It's rare to drive 10 minutes out of a city and find a spot that feels so remote, but the Hare & Hounds is on a hillside a couple of miles north of Bath, with panoramic views that stretch for miles. On a sunny day, the best seats are on the decked terrace, though tables spill over into the garden below. Expect British dishes, from game terrines to homemade burgers, ice cream made in nearby Marshfield and local ale on tap.

hareandhoundsbath.com

THE LIDO RESTAURANT

Bristol

On a swelteringly hot day, a dip in Bristol's lido is a refreshing and utterly civilised prelude to any meal. The restaurant has made waves, thanks to modern, light dishes that draw in diners for the food alone. The Turkish poached eggs with yoghurt, tomato, brown butter and Aleppo pepper (£6.50) make a great start to the day, and a swim followed by the tasting menu (£40) is a memorable way to enjoy a summer evening.

lidobristol.com/restaurant/restaurant-and-poolside-bar

APPLETON'S AT THE VINEYARD

Dark Lane, Padstow, Cornwall English wine is booming, and there's no surer sign than the laden vines at Trevibban Mill. Diners here can get up close in the vineyard's new restaurant, which has outside seats right next to the vines. It opened in March after chef Andy Appleton left Fifteen Cornwall, and he has brought with him Italian dishes that showcase Cornwall's best ingredients. However, the inspiration for the desserts is closer to home, with cherries steeped in red wine (£7) topping a decadent chocolate pudding.

trevibbanmill.com

THE SCARLET RESTAURANT

Mawgan Porth, Cornwall

Book a table on the balcony strip along the front of the restaurant for the best seats in the house: diners can hear the waves break and watch the sun dip into the sea over an evening drink. The menu features regional ingredients: dishes include Cornish fish stew, a puffy Davidstow cheddar soufflé, and a parfait sweetened with local honey. The set lunch (£23.50 for three courses) is a great shout on a sunny day.

scarlethotel.co.uk

EAST, MIDLANDS AND NORTH

THE GEORGIAN TOWNHOUSE

Norwich

This city-centre restaurant is a firm favourite among young families, with plenty of outside space for children to blow off steam. It's great for Sunday lunch, when wooden boards are piled with crispy roast potatoes and mammoth yorkshire puddings. Children's roasts are available (£6), which will fuel them through an afternoon in the playroom, while big kids might finish with a game of outdoor table tennis after lunch.

thegeorgiantownhousenorwich.com

ROCKY BOTTOMS

West Runton, Norfolk

Days at this family-run venue start early as Richard Matthews sets sail in his crab boat, bringing back the catch for his wife, Alison, to start preparing it. Eldest son Hector manages the restaurant, which started out as brick kiln in the 1800s and has beautiful views out to sea. Bag an outside table (it's BYOB), or pick up a dressed lobster to take away (£7.50) and potter down to the coast for a picnic.

rockybottoms.co.uk

THE FEATHERED NEST COUNTRY INN

Nether Westcote, Gloucestershire

The bread basket sets the bar high: home-baked rolls with sheer slivers of home-cured lardo and local butter. But it's quickly trumped by the arrival of the first course, including



hot asparagus dipped into a duck-egg shell filled with savoury custard (£12). The only thing rivalling the beautiful dishes are the breathtaking views across the Evenlode Valley from the terrace seats.

thefeatherednestinn.co.uk

THE SLAUGHTERS COUNTRY INN

Lower Slaughter, Gloucestershire

Climbing roses make a beautiful backdrop to the terrace at this 17th-century stone inn, which overlooks a sprawling garden by the River Eye. It's a family-friendly setting, though the food is a step up from standard pub grub. The roasted beetroot and radish salad comes with a mound of creamed goat's cheese, and the steak is an artfully charred flat-iron cut. Perhaps eke out a warm evening with a cocktail afterwards at Slaughters Manor House across the road.

theslaughtersinn.co.uk

ROOFTOP RESTAURANT AT THE RSC

Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire

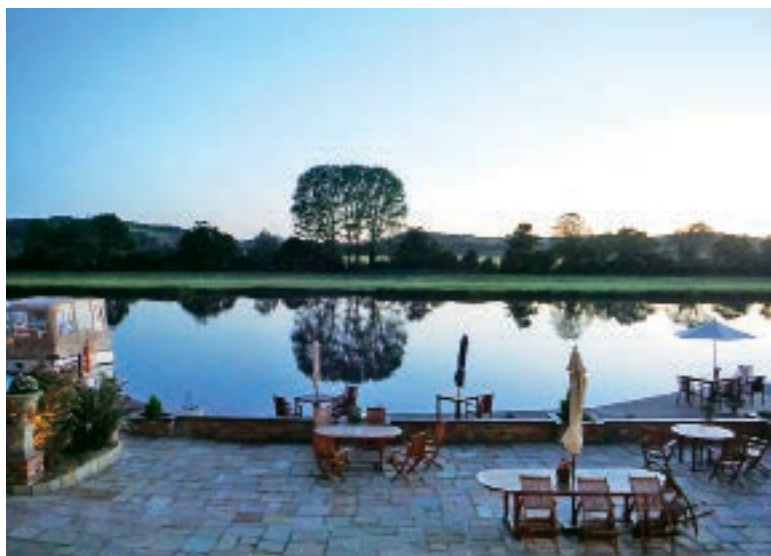
The balcony tables at this third-floor restaurant look out over the River Avon and are great for enjoying a cocktail or a pre-theatre meal (£20 for two courses), though they can't be booked in advance. Grandparents, take note: the theatre has a packed summer-activity programme and the restaurant offers a very sweet high tea for under-12s (£7.50). The tiers of finger sandwiches, jammy dodgers and mini scones make a great treat.

rsc.org.uk/rooftop-restaurant

THE PLOUGH

Birmingham

There is free sunscreen on the garden shelf over the summer months and hot-water bottles on top of a pile of blankets in the winter. And as well as being considerate, the staff at the



Stepping out, clockwise from far left

The Feathered Nest Country Inn, Nether Westcote, Gloucestershire; al fresco seating at Rossini at the Leatherne Bottel, Goring-on-Thames, Oxfordshire, and the restaurant's platter of linguine all'aragosta with half a lobster

Plough know how to make good pizza. There are tempting meat and fish options, but the vegetarian fig, stilton and caramelised onion offering seems the perfect accompaniment to a carafe of chilled rosé on a summer's afternoon.

theploughharborne.co.uk

ALBERT'S SHED
Manchester

When the weather is good, diners overflow from the glass-covered terrace into a courtyard leading down to the canal. It's no wonder — it's rare to find as good value as the set lunch here (£12 for two courses). There are stone-baked pizzas and steak frites alongside Albert's fish and chips, which come with bread and butter for a chip-buttu side dish, showing the pride the team behind this converted tool shed continue to take in the restaurant's Castlefield roots.

albertsshed.com

THE WENSLEYDALE HEIFER
West Witton, Yorkshire

The Yorkshire Dales aren't famed for al fresco dining, nor indeed shellfish, but this place isn't one to conform. It looks like a traditional boozier, but relax on the patio — a glorious little suntrap — with a glass of chardonnay and a maple-roast lobster salad and it couldn't be easier to get on board with this unlikely but utterly delicious mismatch.

wensleydaleheifer.co.uk

WALES, SCOTLAND, NORTHERN IRELAND
LANGLAND'S BRASSERIE
Swansea

The terrace here is great for soaking up the sunshine and watching the surfers at Langland Bay. There's a seafood-heavy selection, with Italian influences: crispy calamari, prawn pappardelle and steaming bowls of mussels. The set menu offers the best

value — £15 for a two-course lunch; £17.50 for a two-course dinner — making it easier to justify a glass of fizz to start, or an affogato laced with amaretto to finish.

www.langlandsbrasserie.co.uk

PIZZATIPI

Cambrian Quay, Cardigan

This couldn't feel further from a high-street chain — it's all local ales, open fires and a constant churn of crisp-based pizza, under an open-sided tepee. It's run by the four Lynch brothers, who have lined up live music on Saturday nights over the summer to help create a festival feel on the bank of the River Teifi. The tepee dominates the courtyard, but there is a café and recently extended Tafarn Smwglin bar in surrounding outhouses to provide shelter should the heavens open.

pizzatipi.co.uk

UBIQUITOUS CHIP

Glasgow

The courtyard restaurant here is a contentious addition, as it's technically under cover, but the

“Creativity in the restaurant scene has opened up a world of outdoor-dining possibilities”

paving-stone floor, indoor greenery and glass ceiling create a convincing al fresco feel while shielding diners from off-season weather. The menu works local ingredients into fresh plates: the oatmeal ice cream and poached brambles is a magnificently modern twist on cranachan. Round off the evening with a dram on the roof terrace, where you truly can breathe in the night air.

ubiquitouschip.co.uk

VENACHAR LOCHSIDE

Callander

The loch-side venue means that midges are inevitable, though the gentle breeze, plus a dash of insect repellent, help stave off the worst. It's certainly worth braving it to watch the late sunset on a summer evening, when the restaurant stays open for dinner (Friday and Saturday only). Throughout the rest of the year, exquisite trout dishes and mouthwatering home-baked cakes definitely make it worth dropping by (lunch is served daily, noon-4pm).

venachar-lochside.com

TAYPARK HOUSE

Dundee

It's al fresco drinking, rather than dining, at the gin and fizz garden bar at Taypark House, but the magical setting and lengthy menu of gins earn it a place on this list regardless. The bar is nestled in the woods of a baronial manor house just outside the city centre, making it the perfect place to sample something from the four pages of Scottish gins, which are infused with local botanicals. After a tippie (or two), head inside for something from the grazing menu — the chef's board (£10) features a changing selection of tapas.

tayparkhouse.co.uk

DEANES AT QUEENS BAR & GRILL

Belfast

It might be based in the university quarter, but the beautiful dishes here couldn't be further from traditional associations with uni grub. On a sunny day, the terrace is one of the hottest spots in town, thanks to the great-value set menu (£20 for three courses). Braised lamb shoulder is tender and delicious, and the beef loin is licked with char and served with lashings of hollandaise. The £12 carafe of wine adds to the convivial feel of a neighbourhood joint.

michaeldeane.co.uk/deanes-at-queens

For five more picks of al fresco tables, go to thesundaytimes.co.uk/food, or The Dish on tablet