



# AN EDIBLE HISTORY OF

# LONDON

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**T**here has been a food market around the modern London Bridge area for more than 2,000 years, visited by Romans, Normans and a host of would-be kings and invaders. Still the biggest and best food market in the capital, Borough Market provides a visible history of London and makes a fine place to start on a culinary tour of the city's past. The current Borough Market has stood on its site beside Southwark Cathedral for just over 250 years, and every Saturday the hordes descend on its food stalls, keeping alive the proud tradition of the London Bridge market.

Today, though, rather than bloodthirsty Norsemen, it's well-heeled locals, curious tourists and the odd celebrity chef that you'll find here, swarming between the stalls in search of first-rate produce, from foie gras and focaccia to truffles and tapas. International cuisines are well represented, but it's British produce that reigns supreme, with such delicacies as Gloucester Old-Spot bacon, dry-cured Cumberland ham, New Forest cider, Dorset crab and Lancashire crumbly cheese all on offer. To summarise, however, is to do this vast, vibrant market a disservice.

In 2006 Borough Market was awarded an Urban Oscar for best national urban space, so controversy raged all the more keenly when plans for a proposed new rail link at London Bridge were announced later the same year. Speculation has been rife that the new tracks will force the market's closure, but trustees have been quick to assure that if development does go ahead, it will be very much business as usual. Borough is no pushover, and the popularity of this fine food destination is enough to make any developer think twice about wrangling with its foodie might.

A new string was recently added to the market's bow with Roast, its first fine dining destination. The restaurant has quite literally given a visit to Borough a whole new perspective, for it occupies the restored mezzanine level of the Floral Hall above the market itself. Vast leaded windows frame views across the stalls to the railway arches, the rooftops and St Paul's beyond. Roast takes its food seriously – and at £25 (€37) for a 10oz Yorkshire Dales sirloin, it certainly should – so it's heartening to also see fish, chips and mushy peas on the menu, served up with a generous portion of wit on a plate wrapped in a faux *Financial Times*.



Leadenhall Market



Borough Market

Drag yourself away from Borough and walk over London Bridge past old Billingsgate Fish Market. The new market has relocated to Canary Wharf, but street names in the area still whisper the city's secret food heritage. Look closely and you'll spy Bread Street, Milk Street and Fish Street Hill, which leads from the bridge up to Leadenhall Market. Leadenhall's ornate 19th-century glass roof stands in elegant contrast to its two ultra-modern neighbours – the Lloyd's Building and Swiss Re's iconic Gherkin. Leadenhall was trading fish and cheese as early as the 1400s but its original structure fell victim to the Great Fire of London. It's still a thriving retail hub, and although fishmongers HS Linwood (established in 1883), is the sole remnant of Leadenhall's glory days, the present market still boasts a wonderful cheese shop, wine merchants, cafes and restaurants.

For a 21st-century take on what the old Leadenhall once resembled, visit at Friday lunchtime when its cobblestone enclaves fill with office workers having a pint in The Lamb or grazing on the olives, artisanal breads and charcuterie served by the stalls that set up temporary shop. The piscatorial of palette can sit down to fish at Chamberlain's (fresh from Billingsgate) or

nearby Sweetings, a Cannon Street fixture since 1830. Walk off lunch with a stroll down Cheapside to one of London's few remaining gin palaces, The Viaduct Tavern, with its vast Victorian triptych depicting three Rubenesque women. The central painting has a hole in the canvas (the result of a misfired shot during a WWI soldiers' squabble) on the poor lady's ample rear. The pub stands on the site of the old Newgate Prison, demolished in 1902. Ask staff nicely and they'll show you the old cells in the basement.

From the Viaduct it's minutes to Smithfield's magnificent grade II-listed Victorian meat market, although if you visit at any reasonable hour, the early-morning traders will have packed up shop. Meat has been sold at Smithfield since the 10th century and today 120,000 tons are shifted annually to the capital's butchers and restaurateurs. The site is steeped in bloody history, having borne witness to the Peasants' Revolt, the hanging of William Wallace, the execution of some 50 heretics at the hand of Mary I and a sorry number of coin forgers, who were gruesomely boiled in oil here in the 1600s.

Nowadays it's all rather more civilised, of course. Two of the capital's most revered restaurants sit in Smithfield's great shadow, and unsurprisingly make





Roast restaurant, Borough



St John Bar and Restaurant, off Smithfield



meat their business. You can breakfast at John Torode's Smiths of Smithfield, directly opposite the market, from 7am. And why not, when a Full English of fine British bacon and sausage will set you back just £6.50 (€9.50)? Serious carnivores, however, will want to investigate the altogether pricier Top Floor restaurant, where the menu reads like a paean to fine meat (a description of 10oz South Devon rump can run to several lines). Just around the corner, off the evocatively named Cowcross Street, Fergus Henderson's St John Restaurant is now legend for its iconic 'nose-to-tail dining', which has single-handedly made offal upmarket and turned the signature roast bone marrow and parsley salad into a dish of international repute.

You may need a stiff drink to recover from the cost of your sweetbreads, and the postcode provides no shortage of nightlife (superclub Fabric occupies Smithfield's old coldstore). Forego Fabric, though, and head up Charterhouse Street to diminutive Elizabethan snug-hole Ye Olde Mitre, built in 1546 and still going strong down an (easy-to-miss) alley linking Ely Place with Hatton Garden. Look out for the blue mitre on a lamp post on Hatton Garden marking the secretive entrance. One of London's oldest, this pub was

a favourite with Dr Johnson, who would drop in for a little post-prandial pale ale before retiring to his nearby lodgings to quill a bon mot or two.

Behind Hatton Garden you'll find Dickens' local – the gloriously named Bleeding Heart Tavern (another flag-flyer for national cuisine serving ale-fed Suffolk suckling pig). The blood isn't a reference to slaughtering livestock at Smithfield, but to the grizzly legend of Lady Elizabeth Hatton. With a daddy who owned most of London's diamonds (Hatton Garden, which bears his name, remains the centre of the City's jewel trade) Lizzie was the 17th-century's answer to Paris Hilton: a beautiful heiress and a bit of a party girl, she was carrying on with the Bishop of Ely behind the Spanish Ambassador's back. In January 1626, during a ball, the spurned Spaniard burst in, waltzed his lover round the dance floor and whisked her outside. Onlookers assumed the couple had merely disappeared to re-cement their friendship, but they couldn't have been more wrong. At dawn Lizzie's body was found in the yard "torn from limb to limb," her heart "still pumping blood onto the cobblestones". It's the stuff London's lore is made of, and an excellent tale to recount as you crack into one of the Tavern's fine bottles of wine.