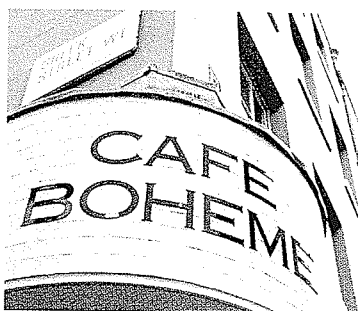


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Does your average punter agree with what the restaurant critics think? Critic Hardeep Singh Kohli and **olive** reader Jeanne Horak-Druiff compare notes on Cafe Boheme

THE RESTAURANT CAFE BOHEME



First opened in 1992, this Soho institution has recently been given a fresh lease of life by new owner, Soho House Group. Group chef-director Henry Harris (formerly of Racine) has revitalised the classic Parisian bistro menu, which now moves comfortably from croque monsieur to chateaubriand under the guidance of head chef Ed Wilson (previously at The Wolseley and Galvin Bistrot de Luxe). Classic interiors include a centrepiece bar, plenty of deep-red leather banquettes and brass fittings. The compact French wine list has a good choice by the glass, half bottle or 500ml pichet (pitcher) and there's a brunch menu and an after-midnight menu in addition to the à la carte.

■ Cafe Boheme, 13-17 Old Compton Street, London W1 (020 7734 0623; cafeboheme.co.uk). Monday to Saturday 8am-3am, Sunday 8am-12am. Starters £4-£9, sandwiches and salads £5-£12; mains £10-£17, puddings £5.

■ Hardeep and Jeanne visited separately and neither informed the staff that they were there to review it, although Hardeep was recognised by staff on his visit.

THE PRO



Radio 4 regular Hardeep Singh Kohli was runner-up on BBC One's *Celebrity MasterChef* in 2006, and is a presenter on BBC One's *The One Show* and with John Torode on UKTV Food's *New British Kitchen: Torode and Hardeep's Tour*. He has also appeared as a judge on BBC One's *Can You Cook It?*

THE PUNTER



Jeanne Horak-Druiff lives in London and works for a City law firm. She eats out twice a week and enjoys Spanish or rustic French food. Her best eating out experience was at Petersham Nurseries in Richmond, Surrey.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

HARDEEP Henry Harris, has brought his love and knowledge of French food to Cafe Boheme on Old Compton Street. After entering through the buzzing bar I felt like I'd stepped straight out of Soho and into Paris's fashionable Le Marais. The bar was packed so it took a bit of effort to get attention but we were greeted by a French waiter who smoothly guided us past a couple arguing animatedly in French – all auguring well for the authenticity of the food.

THE FOOD

HARDEEP I have been coming to Cafe Boheme since the early 90s. All those years I never ate there once, preferring to drink myself into a gentle vodka-spurred stupor than eat the food in what looked much like a slightly upmarket Café Rouge.

But how things have changed. The menu is resolutely simple but resoundingly French. I started with escargots, served in quintessential garlic and parsley butter. The snails were nicely plump and al dente but not too hard and chewy. Often I find garlic butter overwhelmingly garlicky but here it had been off-set with a generous dose of parsley, which, combined with plenty of soft bread to lap it up with, worked wonders. My one minor criticism was that it was slightly under-seasoned.

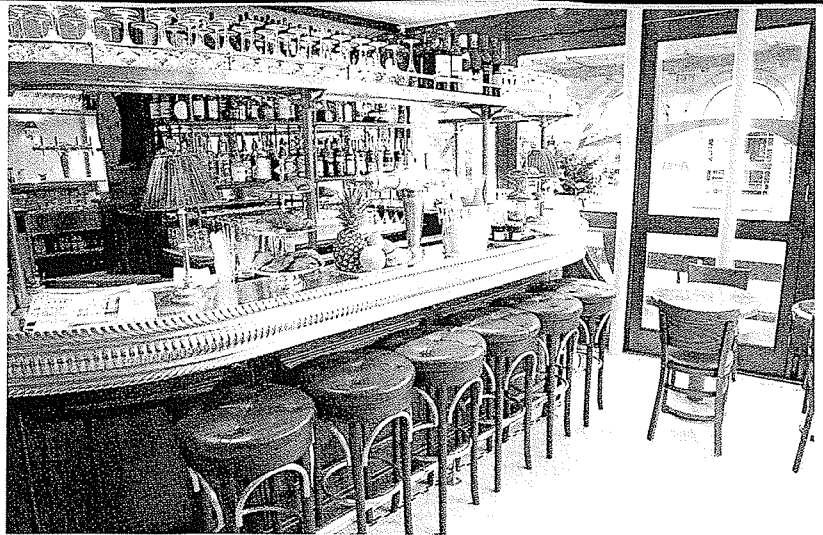
JEANNE Despite arriving only three minutes early, the greeter told us our table was not ready and left us in the heaving bar. Fifteen minutes later we saw an empty table and asked the same waitress if we could be seated. She had clearly forgotten us, brusquely saying there were no tables until 9.30pm. It's cramped and noisy but I liked our side-by-side, two-seater table. The brief menu features bistro classics such as confit de canard and croque monsieur and there's a good selection of French wines.

JEANNE To start, snails were excellent – big meaty beasts with a surprisingly subtle garlic butter, heavy on the parsley. Oysters, though, stole the show: faultlessly shucked, beautifully fresh and complemented by an excellent shallot vinegar.

Mains were no less impressive. My whole gurnard Grenobloise was a revelation with its crisp skin and juicy flesh somewhere between flaky cod and meaty monkfish. The Grenobloise sauce of browned butter, capers and lemon juice was a delight, as were the tiny crispy croutons swimming in it and the side order of addictive, thin frites.

My husband's slow-cooked shoulder of lamb was packed with flavour, fall-apart tender and accompanied by unctuous flageolet beans. Unfortunately the beans

For more on BBC One's *The One Show* with Hardeep Singh Kohli see bbc.co.uk/theoneshow/



For mains I eventually settled on the whole gurnard in a sauce Grenobloise. Gurnard is the monkfish of the eco-friendly generation; it shares the same firm texture and robust flavour but not its scarcity. It stood up brilliantly to the brown butter, capers, parsley, lemon and croutons in the sauce.

Steak and chips was also exemplary, a good cut of meat, beautifully chargrilled. Often you can taste the profit margin in a steak but here it was substantial and came with wonderful, twice-fried frites.

Chocolate mousse was the best I've had in my life. Deceptively difficult to get right, here it was gloriously rich but so light it almost evaporated in my mouth.

also came with a piece of gravel the size of a popcorn kernel – it was a small miracle that he didn't shatter a tooth. Chocolate mousse was served completely unadorned but had a good depth of bitter chocolate and the consistency of a proper cream-free mousse. Crêpes with griottine cherries were a delicious contrast – custard-filled pancakes spiked with astonishingly alcoholic cherries.

SERVICE WITH A SMILE?

HARDEEP Service was exemplary. Too many French restaurants pride themselves on rudeness when it comes to staff but Cafe Boheme feels very well run. It manages to combine a relaxed approach with speedy service and unfussy efficiency. Although the place was busy on the Sunday evening we visited, the manageress took the time to swing by and have a chat.

JEANNE Our waiter was excellent: professional, friendly and knowledgeable. The ultra-trendy sommelier however, treated us as if we were barely visible. The manager who came to see us after our close encounter with the piece of gravel asked only if any teeth were broken and apologised but did not offer as much as a free espresso. After we had finished our coffee, the same greeter came over not to offer the bill, but to say 'I'm afraid we need this table back,' a fact never mentioned at booking and an unnecessary annoyance.

THE VERDICT

HARDEEP Cafe Boheme's pride in its authentic French menu is well-placed. With the Soho House machine behind it and Henry Harris and head chef Ed Wilson at the wheel, I think Cafe Boheme will fast become a top 10 destination for any diner looking for a relaxing evening with great food.

JEANNE Food was well-priced and authentic, like a little trip to Paris, but the mercenary table-turning policy brought us back to London with a bump. The service (with the exception of our lovely waiter) left us feeling more manhandled than cosseted.

THE MATHS

Hardeep's bill for two, including two starters, two mains, two puddings, three bottles of water and two glasses of house white, came to **£147.53** excluding service.

Food 8/10
Atmosphere 9/10
Service 9/10

TOTAL 26/30

Go again? Most definitely. I love the menu, and this kind of buzzy atmosphere is difficult to find.

Jeanne's bill for two, including two starters, two mains, two puddings, water, coffees and a bottle of Chateau de Trignon Gigondas (£38), came to **£107** excluding service.

Food 8/10
Atmosphere 6/10
Service 5/10

TOTAL 19/30

Go again? Only for a quick pre- or post-theatre meal.

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