



6 of the best



MICHELIN-STAR MEALS UNDER £50

Got the tastes of a prince, but the means of a pauper? At these bargain eateries, you'll get three award-winning courses for 49 notes or less

1 Fonda Xesc Gombrèn, Catalonia

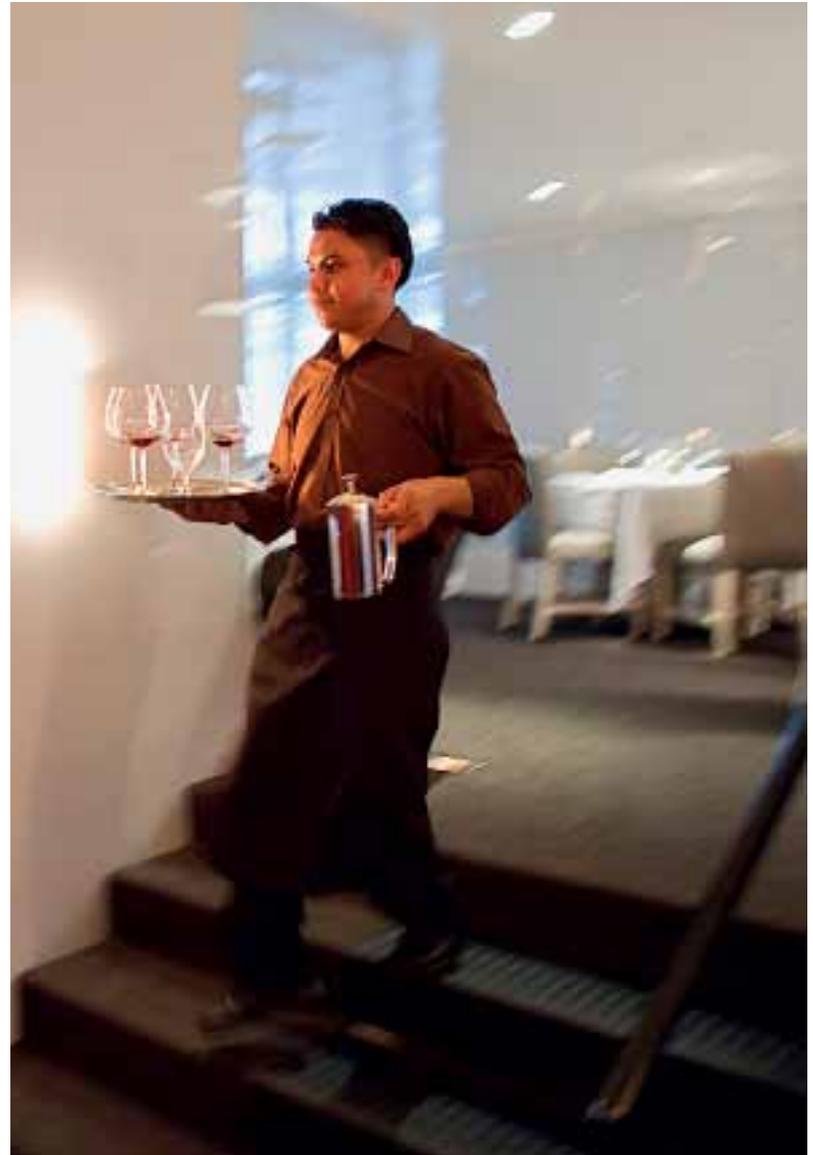
Catalonian cuisine made some headway this year, notching up 60 stars (with El Bulli generously contributing three). Fonda Xesc, a diminutive dining room on a pretty little square in the mountain village of Gombrèn, was perhaps the least expectant recipient. But between its stone walls, vaults and archways, chef Francesc Rovira's flavour combinations frequently elicit gasps and giggles. His speciality starter is a tidy stack of tuna tartare with apple, avocado and herring eggs – hardly the peasant-fuel you might expect in the surroundings. Cod is served with pistachio, tomato and sweet basil, while veal cheek is cooked with hazelnuts and mushrooms; the ingredients for both are grown in

Fonda Xesc's back garden. Handily (as there's nowhere else to stumble back to), there are bedrooms upstairs. And with these bedrooms comes breakfast...

Must-eat dish: Out in the valley, alongside fresh mushrooms, tomatoes, artichokes and garlic, are the rolling stripes of vineyards. Catalonia has always been responsible for a lot of cava – so much so that its name comes from the Catalan for 'cave', where it was traditionally stored. To sample Fonda Xesc's own fizz at its best, try it as a sorbet; chocolate addicts can always plump for the mousse (above) and split desserts. Two spoons = double the fun.

● *Tasting menu £38pp or mains £15-£24 (00 34 972 730404, www.fondaxesc.com).*





2 The Royal Oak Paley Street, Berkshire

In this little Berkshire hamlet, the polo-playing locals are spoiled for choice at dinnertime – if they don't fancy the short drive to Heston Blumenthal's Fat Duck or Michel Roux's Waterside Inn (three stars apiece), they can hop in their helicopters and dine in London. Alternatively, there's the local: The Royal Oak, where a pint of London Pride is most often served alongside hot scotch quail's eggs, miraculously soft in the middle, heavy on sausage meat, and dressed up like golden nuggets. And beyond the bar snacks, chef Dominic Chapman's menu is a document of joy: the sea kale, which looks like celery and behaves like asparagus, is only grown in one Scottish garden; it's then blessed with a ramekin of blood-orange

hollandaise, which you'll want to eat by the spoonful. The lasagne of rabbit isn't a lasagne, more a deconstructed ravioli – but it's too silky soft to pick holes in.

Must-eat dish: It's difficult to describe what happens once you've tapped your way through the bronze crust of the crème brûlée, because what lurks beneath is a thick swamp of pale custard so creamy it'll relieve your mouth of words. Other puds to make you salivate include Baked Alaska, piped like a triumphant white fortress and fully loaded with panettone and ice cream; and rice pudding, which comes vanilla-flecked, alongside a helping of jam doughnuts.

● Mains £12-£32 (01628 620541, www.theroyaloakpaleystreet.com).

3 Convivio Midtown, Manhattan

In New York City, the pursuit of faultless pasta begins and ends at Convivio – a buzzy Italian that won a star in only its second year. Here, dough is kneaded until fingers ache, and chef Michael White has created tasty vessels for his pork shoulder ragu or creamy carbonara. *Primi* rule, especially *malloreddus* (saffron gnocchetti with crab and sea urchin) and *cicatelli al forno* (baked ricotta and semolina dumplings). But it's all excellent, so if you're in a group, order shrewdly and pass plates about. The dining room takes its cues from the south Italian menu: it's noisily 'convivial', with sauce stains and beaming grins occupying crisp white tables. And after *secondi* of parmigiano-crusting veal or black

sea bass, the *affogato al caffè* is dessert and coffee rolled into one: a deluge of espresso poured over *gelato*.

Must-eat dish: A four-course prix fixe (£40) leaves room in the budget for prosecco – but not so fast, because there's a tantalising fifth course. *Sfizi* comes before *primi* and is similar to *cicchetti*, or Italian tapas: for £4, you can nibble on *arancini* – gorgeous spheres of baked saffron risotto with molten cheese in the middle. These, along with a few mouth-watering castelvetro olive (£2) and grilled mushrooms *vin cotto* (£4), are the surest signs you're on to a winner.

● Prix fixe £40 or mains £17-£20 (00 1 212 599 5045, www.convivionyc.com). >



4 Arbutus Soho, London

The question most often asked after a meal at Arbutus is this: if *they* can produce Michelin-starred food this affordably in Soho, why can't the rest of the capital's restaurants manage it? And while we wait for an answer, Arbutus cracks on – preening and perfecting a menu that has been quietly winning fans since 2006. The lunch menu is most popular, presenting three beautiful courses for £16.95, a sum total you could almost match with a particularly lavish trip to Pret a Manger. But the à la carte is astounding value too: sea bream is generously scattered with Cornish mussels, chorizo and fresh bergamot, while the grilled rib of grass-fed beef with *gratin dauphinois* (for two), is the top-of-the-menu dish you'd usually have to rule out on price grounds. All wines are

available by the 250ml carafe – a cheering reminder that this is a bistro that wants you to have a jolly nice time, without fear of pricey repercussions.

Must-eat dish: The squid and mackerel burger. While Arbutus' menu keeps evolving, depending on what chef Anthony Demetre can pick up from the market, the 's&m' would be too sorely missed to strike off. Chunks of perfectly cooked squid are packed into mackerel, with the help of ginger, garlic and olive oil, before being pan-fried and garnished with razor clams and sea purslane. It doesn't matter how many times they hand out the recipe, regulars keep coming back to savour it the Michelin-starred way.

● Mains £17-£20 (020 7734 4545, www.arbutusrestaurant.co.uk) >





5 La Réserve Rimbaud Montpellier, Languedoc

The river Lez flows bottle green beside the terrace, flickering in the sunshine; if you've got ringside seats, your waiter will suggest you fling in a chunk of homemade bread, for a glimpse of one of the enormous fish. Beyond, sweeping greenery completes a picture so idyllic it makes the chic dining room look dull by comparison – it's all about the outdoors at Rimbaud, which is located just far enough out of Montpellier to perk you up with its fresh air and restorative, seasonal food. Beneath ancient shady trees you might eat mushrooms stuffed into cannelloni, pan-fried scallops marinated in apples from the tree, or sole *meunière* with poached artichokes and carrot vinaigrette. The Languedoc favourite,

bouillabaisse, is served in two stages – seafood first, fish second, with a gap in between for looking up at (by now) starry skies, to a soundtrack of croaking frogs. **Must-eat dish:** Black truffles have never been easy to slide subtly into a menu, but La Réserve Rimbaud has been hiding them in its chicken nuggets since the Gousserand brothers dreamed up the recipe for *croquettes du Lez* in 1902. All chefs who have since passed through here have learned to create *croquettes* with crisp, golden cases, and creamy, melting middles. Take a bite – there's a reason these beauties have been on the menu for 108 years. ● *Three courses* £43, or *all mains* £25 (00 33 467 725253, www.reserve-rimbaud.com).

6 Tim Ho Wan Mongkok, Hong Kong

This is the cheapest Michelin-star restaurant in the world. The most expensive dish at this basic dim sum canteen, in Hong Kong's gritty Mongkok neighbourhood, is just £1.37 (the chicken feet), while 80p will buy you steamed beef dumplings. The total bill for two, ordering food till you burst, will be around a tenner. Compare that to Alain Ducasse's tasting menu in Paris – £315pp – and you've almost saved the airfare.

Tim Ho Wan means 'Add good luck' in Cantonese, and you'll need it if you're going to get in. Despite opening from 10am till 10pm, there are long queues all day – so long, in fact, a ticket system was introduced when numbers got out of hand. Hopeful diners pick up their number at the door and

wait to be called. A short wait might be an hour, but most people are lingering for two to three hours before they eat. **Must-eat dish:** So, how does a dim sum restaurant serving 80p dishes win a Michelin star? It's down to owner Mak Pui Gor, who was formerly dim sum chef at the Four Seasons Hong Kong – famous in Asia for his barbecue pork buns. Unsurprisingly then, when he opened his own place the Michelin star soon followed... as did the buns. Order them at the end of your feast (they're so sweet they could almost pass for dessert) and then get another box to go, as veteran diners do. ● *Mains from 80p* (Shop 8, 2-20 Kwong Wa Street, Mongkok; no reservations). ■

WORDS: KATIE BOWMAN, LAURA GOODMAN PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY, ALAMY, STOCKFOD, KATIE BOWMAN

