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All Restaurants Lead to Rome



In Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, John Cleese's anti-Roman protagonist asks a room full of comedy insurgents what, if anything, the Romans have ever given the people. Much to Cleese's displeasure, a long list is compiled, covering everything from roads, irrigation and sanitation to law and order, viniculture and so forth. To this list we could add restaurants, which first made an appearance in ancient Rome.

Thermopolia were small tavern-style establishments that served wine and pre-prepared dishes – probably limited to dried foods, though hot meals may also have been available – from L-shaped solid stone counters. These early diners were closer to modern fast-food outlets than sit-down restaurants and catered mainly to the poorer classes who did not have access to a private kitchen, the preserve of the wealthy in Roman society. Thermopolia may also have performed a social function in the manner of village pubs or workingmen's clubs.

The next milestone in the evolution of the restaurant can be found in the Middle Kingdom, or more specifically in Kaifeng, then China's northern capital, where eateries started to flourish during the Song dynasty. These early restaurants served the merchant classes and provided a wide selection of food. For the first time we can see establishments serving different cuisines and catering to different budgets.

By the 16th century dining out was a common occurrence in England, with people of all classes enjoying food, wine, ale and tobacco at city and country taverns, which also served as social centres... for men. In most cases entry for women was prohibited, beginning a long-standing British tradition of gender-segregated establishments.

The next station on our whistle-stop tour of the history of restauranteering is, fittingly, 18th-century France where the concept of the restaurant as we know it today emerged. This explains why the gastronomic terminology used in many languages today is derived mainly from French, including the word 'restaurant' itself, which originally meant 'to restore'. By the early 1700s the term was being used to describe a nutritional dish, usually a soup or broth, supposedly with 'restorative' powers. 'Restaurant' later came to refer to places that sold these bouillons, before evolving into the generic meaning it has today.

In 1782 La Grande Taverne de Londres opened in Paris (not London), and was the first establishment to have menus and private tables for diners – laying down the blueprint of the modern restaurant. The establishment's owner, Antoine Beauvilliers, would go on to write a cookbook that defined French cuisine as we know it.

The late 1800s saw the first cafeterias begin operations in the US. These large self-service restaurants, the Big Apple's Exchange Buffet being amongst the earliest incarnations, catered to the growing workforces in the industrial heartlands of New York, Chicago and beyond.

The last century saw the restaurant given a modern twist, with the drive-in making its first appearance in – surprise, surprise – California circa 1936; by the 1950s the first of the now-ubiquitous fast-food franchises had hit the high streets. And since then we have seen the emergence of just about every kind of eatery imaginable, catering to all possible tastes, budgets and themes.

Mezban, Kerala

Collaborative Architecture

Photography by Robert Miller

Mezban is a new multi-cuisine restaurant in Hotel Asma Tower, Kerala. Mumbai-based design practice Collaborative Architecture was tasked with creating a brand new identity for the eatery, albeit on a very tight budget. The brief called for a flexible layout that offered greater efficiency, even though this meant cutting down the seating capacity in favour of 2- and 4-seater tables. A vibrant waiting lounge has been carved out from the space to showcase the goings-on on the floor. The dining area is casual yet sophisticated, with black-and-white seating combinations, several corner booths, a kids' playroom, plus live cooking and dedicated buffet areas.

Structural columns help organise the layout, and the use of customised 'drop down' lights illuminate the whole space. The architects also installed a series of LED lights along the exterior wall (described as 'Thousand Moons') to enhance the façade.



