# L’Hexagone, Norwich: ‘Simple things done very well’ – restaurant review

This gorgeous little French bistro hits all the right notes effortlessly. Elsewhere in Norwich, XO Kitchen is gleefully playing with the Asian repertoire

[**L’Hexagone**](https://www.hexagonebistrofrancais.com/)**, 22 Lower Goat Lane, Norwich NR2 1EL (01603 926 886). Starters and small plates £7-£12, mains £14-£24, desserts £7, wines from £21**

Early in my happy adventures as a gigging musician, putting my ragbag of borrowed licks and boundless, puppyish enthusiasm before very kind audiences, I had an epiphany. Whatever my ambitions, I was not required to have mastered the piano completely before playing for people. The jazz world may be strewn with mighty saxophonists who turn up to gigs bellowing “any tune, any key, any tempo”. To me, they are God-like figures. But I did not have to be, indeed could never be, like them. Instead, I simply had to be able to play the tunes I was performing at that moment. Back then the audience did not need to know that there was not much else beyond the 10-song set they’d just heard. I would still be, and indeed remain, the best jazz pianist of all the British restaurant critics.

There’s a lot to be said for being good over a narrow bandwidth; for doing a small number of things really well, rather than trying to prove your exhausting high-trapeze virtuosity. I thought about this while studying the brown-paper menu at L’Hexagone in Norwich. It is the tiny French restaurant that really can. It is the sort of place we could all do with more of, when money is tight and we need to take our pleasures with care.

The decor of the small space, on a narrow slab-stoned alley, is what I’ve just defined to myself as Refined Goth: the walls are painted black. Downstairs is a bar with seating for at least, ooh, six. Upstairs, past the spray-painted words “liberté, égalité, fraternité”, is a dining room seating another mighty 20. In keeping with the very smallness of it all, that lunch menu runs to barely 50 French words. They are, however, great French words: a distillation of southern French country cooking down to its essentials. The cook is Frenchman Thomas Aubrit, son of a cook, nephew of a butcher. His English wife, Gemma, whom he met at the restaurant he was working in back in France, runs front-of-house.

Come early and they’ll do you really good coffee, pastries and a croque monsieur or madame. Come for lunch and it’s soup, salads and a bunch of cheery things involving beef. That really is the sum of it: to over-extend this jazz-food analogy until it submits a letter of resignation, it’s a tight nightclub set that hits all the right notes, and most definitely in the right order. The £12 [salade niçoise](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/wordofmouth/2012/aug/01/how-make-perfect-salade-nicoise) is a pleasingly dense, chopped affair, with a pretty arrangement of anchovies and tomatoes, topped by half a boiled egg, its yolk at a perfect state of jamminess. A tomato tartine is a crisply toasted piece of sourdough smeared thickly with garlic-boosted tapenade and laid with slices of beef tomato, closely zigzagged with stripes of thick pungent [pistou](https://www.theguardian.com/food/2019/jun/12/perfect-soupe-au-pistou-pesto-recipe-felicity-cloake), the French answer to pesto only with a little Gallic swagger. Eat the tartine with your hands and you’ll be smelling your lunch on your fingertips for hours after, in a happy way.

There is, of course, [steak frites](https://www.theguardian.com/food/2019/mar/26/20-best-recipes-meals-for-one-nigel-slater-gill-meller-steak-salad-casseroles), or a bavette with a shallot sauce. Cheaper, gnarlier cuts get the only treatment they understand: stewed until breaking down into threaded fragments, in a tomatoey stew with black olives, new potatoes and the lofty insistence of fennel seeds. The special today is a [steak tartare](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2011/dec/11/nigel-slater-classic-steak-tartare), a properly dressed affair, with a golden egg yolk at its centre and a big heap of hand-cut chips, still tipped with the fat-wrinkled skins. It’s a generous heap for £24.

We could now play “guess the desserts”, but the game won’t last very long, will it? You know it will include chocolate mousse; a soft, slightly grainy milk chocolate version topped with chocolate flakes, all of which melts away to nothing on the tongue. Yes, there’s a butter-yellow [crème brûlée](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/wordofmouth/2012/sep/20/how-to-cook-perfect-creme-brulee), the burnt sugared surface just begging for the crack of the teaspoon. Have the vanilla [panna cotta](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/wordofmouth/2011/aug/25/how-to-make-perfect-panna-cotta) with the fruit purée if you like, but mine’s still that crème brûlée, eaten until I’ve run the edge of my spoon all the way round the terracotta bowl to remove all the crusty, sugary bits.

In the evenings, there’s a 14-course tasting menu, each dish evoking the profound landscape of Provence. Don’t be silly. Of course there isn’t. That would be exhausting. It’s exactly the same tight, enticing proposition, perhaps with the addition of a fish dish. It’s just a bunch of simple things done very well and with true, beguiling charm. To go with it, drink something sweetly familiar from the short wine list that hasn’t heard of anywhere outside France. Almost all of it is available by the glass; almost all of it is under £40. Don’t come to L’Hexagone expecting life-changing drama. Come here expecting to be fed. Incidentally, the name is a French nickname for the shape of their country. I did not know this and now I do. Every day is a school day.

While I’m loitering in Norwich, I have to mention chef Jimmy Preston’s [XO Kitchen,](https://www.instagram.com/xo__kitchen/?hl=en) which, in its own way, also sticks within a narrow frame, in this case a cheeky, magpie-like romp across Asian flavours. They knew I was coming, indeed allowed me to order in advance because otherwise I would have been too late for last orders. Therefore, this can’t quite be considered a review, but I adored the face-slapping flavours so much they have to be mentioned. Come for the char sui pork belly, both charred and wobbly under a brain-blasting rust-coloured sauce, with a heap of pickled cucumber and a dollop of Norwich-appropriate Colman’s Mustard.

Sooth the mustard burn with the watermelon salad, in a big soupy dressing heaped with mint, peanuts and fresh chilli. Do order the beef massaman, a lush coconut curry, with a hacked-off chunk of bone, the well filled with wobbly, hot, bone marrow. Special praise is reserved for their BBQ hispi cabbage, with a black bean dressing and a golden, crispy rubble that Preston calls XO seasoning. So, what is that exactly, Jimmy? “Well,” he says slowly. “You need a pork element for XO so that’s crushed-up Frazzles. And then you need dried seafood so that’s Scampi Fries.” He looks away. “Monster Munch might also have been involved.” If you are appalled by that, what are you doing reading this column? It’s utter genius. The rest of you, go to Norwich. Lunch at L’Hexagone. Dinner at XO Kitchen. Or the other way round. I really don’t care. Either way, job done.