# Etles Uyghur, London: ‘You’ll be well fed, and learn a little along the way’ – restaurant review

Visit this classy Uyghur restaurant for lessons in culture and geography, and tasty chicken piled high

[**Etles Uyghur Restaurant**](https://etlesfinchley.com/)**, 424 Finchley Road, London NW2 2HY (020 7431 5698). Starters £7.50-£9.99, mains £12.50-£16, big plate chicken £30, desserts £4.50. Unlicensed**

The menu at Etles Uyghur restaurant, located at the leafier Golders Green end of London’s Finchley Road, is not just a thrilling list of edible promises. It’s also a subtle lesson in physical and human geography. Obviously, there’s no pork listed because of the predominantly Muslim culture of the Uyghur people, which the Chinese government has been attempting to annihilate so brutally, for so long. Nor is there much in the way of fish because [Xinjiang](https://www.theguardian.com/world/xinjiang) province, home to the Uyghurs, is far from the sea. Here it’s all about beef, lamb and chicken.

Even without knowing exactly where Xinjiang is on the map, we can assume it’s in northern China because of the wheat culture, represented by the bootlace-thick leghmen noodles and flat breads and beautifully pleated manta dumplings. Generally in China, it’s rice to the south, wheat to the north. Those manta dumplings, along with the skewers of spice-dusted meats and a mercimek or lentil soup, provide another clue. There may be a few Chinese crowd-pleasers like mapo tofu and kung pao chicken available here. But those other dishes locate this food in China’s northwestern borderlands, where the membrane between cultures is at its most porous, waving in the flavours and influences of the Turks and Central Asia. Quite so. Owners and chefs [Mukaddes Yadikar](https://www.theguardian.com/food/2022/sep/11/Mukaddes%20Yadikar) and her husband, Ablikim Rahman, are indeed Turkic Muslim Uyghurs from Yili, close to China’s border with Kazakhstan.

Geography plays another part in this review, although in a rather more banal, inexcusably pathetic way. For a long time it was hard to find this food in the capital, beyond the broad offering at the lovely [Silk Road](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2009/sep/06/chinese-restaurant-silk-road-london) in Camberwell, famed for its soupy big plate chicken. Then in 2017 Yadikar and Rahman chose Walthamstow in northeast London for the original [Etles](https://etleswalthamstow.com/), the word for the region’s ornate silks. I read lots of enthusiastic reports online, but the fact is I’m a repugnant, prejudiced south Londoner. I have gone to the very north of Scotland to review restaurants and to obscure bits of rural England where the map is probably stamped with the words “here be dragons”. But Walthamstow? The other end of the Victoria line? Don’t be absurd.

Then recently I noticed this second outpost, in what was once my northwest London adolescent stomping ground. The Finchley Road? That I could do. You should, too. The great value food manages to be both exciting and nurturing at the same time. On a warm, late-summer’s evening the doors are thrown open to the street. Inside the brightly lit dining room, hung with dashing Uyghur textiles, the mood is very much of a community space into which you have been invited. There are few other diners tonight, but soon a family group arrives and are kissed and hugged by the owner and ushered to the back where clearly friends of the house eat. An outrageously cute gurgling baby is dandled on various knees, because it takes a village or at the very least, a restaurant.

In the way of cultures that understand the need to make the most of what you have, offal plays a sizable part here. Cold starters at about £8 include plates of both spiced beef tripe and tongue. Usually, they have skewers of kidney, dusted with cumin and chilli, but not today. Instead, we have the lamb skewers, hot off the grill, the fat still crunchy and warm. We have more lamb, this time minced with onion and wrapped in the soft embrace of pillowy dumplings the colour of old, white piano keys. They come with a dark, grainy dipping sauce full of ground spice.

Our waiter looks doubtful when I order the stir-fried tripe. Am I sure? Yes, I’m sure and please ignore the way my companion over there is recoiling. She doesn’t know what the hell she’s missing. I love this stuff. This is not one of those tripe dishes that manages somehow to disguise its true nature. The pretty ribbons of hexagonal cow stomach may have been pelted with chilli bean paste and fried fiercely with lots of chopped peppers, but they still retain their joyous, offally funk. What’s the point of ordering tripe if it doesn’t taste like tripe?

My companion is much happier with their thick, slurpy, hand-pulled noodles, stir-fried with pieces of beef, spring onions and sesame seeds. Like most of the mains it costs £14 and is comfort food for a stormy day or a quiet day or any damn day. It is a plate of carbohydrate-boosted, savoury, reassuring joy. And then there is the big-plate chicken. It costs £30, which sounds like relatively big money until a platter the size of a monster truck hubcap arrives. It is so very huge, in so very many ways. There are hunks of long braised chicken and big pieces of potato cooked to that point where they start to crumble away into the rich chilli-spiked liquor. Dig deeper and you’ll find frilly ribbons of hand-cut noodles. This dish is thick and sustaining, as if engineered with a harsh wind off the Mongolian steppe in mind. We attack it enthusiastically, but still have to request takeaway containers. We fill two each for our loved ones at home, who will now love us even more.

Desserts are homemade, just not in this particular home. They have a lovely Turkish lady who makes the flaky, syrup-drenched baklava, we’re told, and a Russian lady who makes the multi-layered honey cake. They don’t serve alcohol, but have a corkage-free, bring-your-own policy. The bottle of Chablis I brought ends up feeling like a poncey affectation, which it is; I’m not much of a beer drinker, but it would be so much more the thing. Just make sure to buy it in advance. The surrounding strip is short on useful shops unless you want a quartz inlay kitchen work surface.

The [Uyghurs](https://www.theguardian.com/world/uyghurs) are too often in our minds only because of the genocidal crimes being committed against them by the Chinese government. It helps, I think, to gain an edge of an understanding of the deep culture that’s being persecuted. One of the best ways to do that is always through food, because how and what we eat defines us. So go to Etles. Order the big-plate chicken. You’ll be well fed, and learn a little along the way.