# Roasta Preston, Preston: ‘Takes you far beyond comfort food’ – restaurant review

This cheerful Cantonese diner is a delight, and the menu is worth exploring in depth

[**Roasta Preston**](https://roasta-preston.co.uk/)**, 43 Plungington Road, Preston PR1 7EP (01772 827 958). Most dishes £8-£12, sharing platters £12-£30. Unlicensed**

The late, great foreign correspondent Nicholas Tomalin famously once said that, to achieve success in journalism, you needed “rat-like cunning, a plausible manner and a little literary ability”. Restaurant critics need a few other qualities: a rapacious appetite, broad tastes and a serviceable set of teeth. The latter have been a little challenging of late. Recently, on a trip to see my dentist to discuss a front crown that keeps unbonding, he told me he had taken to reading my reviews with trepidation. “I was certain one thing you ordered was going to take that tooth out,” he said.

I thought about my dentist when our first dish landed at the tiny Chinese café, Roasta Preston. It was a heaped platter of duck wings, duck necks and duck gizzards for £13. The obscure corners and extremities of the duck, too often the parts left behind, are offered here in a variety of styles: braised, spicy fried or, the one we had chosen, lightly battered and deep-fried with minced garlic, salt and pepper. If anything was going to dislodge a crown it had to be these. This plateful was a bunting-strewn festival of hands-on nibblage and tooth tugging, of crisped skin and meat dragged in ribbons from the bone, interspersed with the occasional dense nugget of bronzed gizzard, chopsticked from the plate. It was delightfully compulsive. It was engrossing. And happily, Mr Sharma, it wasn’t dentally challenging.

A couple of weeks ago I made much of [Kushi-Ya](https://www.theguardian.com/food/2022/oct/16/jay-rayner-restaurant-revie-kushi-ya-nottingham-a-blissfully-good-place) in Nottingham not being a hidden gem, just somewhere I hadn’t heard of before, which is not the same thing. I do, however, regard Roasta as a bit of a find, not least because of how I found it. With a spare lunch in Preston I went looking for possibilities. That high-end place predictably doing tasting menus I didn’t have the energy to sit through, wasn’t in any case open on a Tuesday lunchtime. I brought up a Google map of the city and put the word “restaurant” in the search bar, then clicked on literally every red knife and fork across that map that wasn’t attached to a Nando’s or Turtle Bay.

I found Roasta outside the city centre on the corner of a residential shopping parade, just past the Central Lancashire University campus, which doubtless provides much of its custom. Normally, I treat gushing online user reviews with caution, as though they are potentially infected with anthrax until proven otherwise. But there was a warm unanimity to these, complete with repeated assertions that the food here recalled the very best places in Hong Kong, written by people who sounded like they knew their stuff. This makes sense. Roasta was opened five years ago by Fai Tsang and her husband, Wai, who are indeed from Hong Kong. She runs the tiny 20-seater dining room and he is in the kitchen.

At the heart of the menu are Cantonese meat dishes to share: a whole roast duck for £30, a whole soy-marinated chicken for £25. We have the duo meat platter, for £15. The duck, offered off or on the bone, is a very solid example, its shimmering, lacquered skin cracking beneath the teeth. The roast pork belly is simply magnificent. Almost all the fat has been rendered away and the salty crackling has become a golden savoury honeycomb that first crunches and then seems to melt away. We are given dishes of plum sauce and soy to dip it into, and do so with something close to reverence. Alongside this, creamy white Chinese leaf, fried in a dark vinegar sauce with caramel tones beneath the acidity, becomes a perfect dancing partner.

Most of the menu is made up of ingredients offered in a variety of ways for around £10 a go. You can have boneless chicken thigh or pork in, say, black bean sauce or with pickled cabbage, in satay sauce or fried and coated with salted egg and so on. Dry-fried green beans with minced pork are offered with garlic, preserved olives or, as we have them, with black beans. It’s a hilarious turbo charge to an already flavour-boosted dish. Finally, we have squeakily fresh prawns, sliced at the back and curled in on themselves like fat commas, in a broth thick with cracked black pepper and glugs of Shaoxing wine.

Of course, you can have rice, or their own hand-pulled noodles in broth or a variety of Guilin-style rice noodles, but I always worry a ballast of carbs will get in the way of the stuff I’m really interested in. I tell them I’ll have rice at the end if I’m still hungry. I don’t order rice. Roasta is unlicensed, but the food is giving me enough of a high. I pass on the bubble tea option; I just don’t get the appeal of those wobbly tapioca balls. Instead, I drink jasmine tea poured from a constantly refilled teapot into a thimble-sized enamel mug.

Roasta very much falls into the column marked café rather than restaurant; perhaps, to salami slice the definitions, into that noble column marked “caff”. It is an elbows-on-the-table sort of place, where you could hunker down by yourself over a bowl of something steaming and delicious that makes the world better, and all at an extremely good price. But the menu deserves to be fully explored. It takes you far beyond comfort food and into a whole bunch of the Cantonese tradition’s intriguing ginnels, to use a Lancashire-appropriate word. Leave the plastic at home; they only accept cash. We have over ordered for two, and settle a bill for £56.

My virtual journey across the Preston map, one excitable click at a time, also led me, that evening, to the sweetly accommodating [Bar Pintxos](https://www.barpintxos.co.uk/), off Fishergate in the centre of town. I got in just before the kitchen closed for a great value bottle of albariño and a few plates of very agreeable tapas: more fat prawns, but this time pil pil, in a thick garlicky sauce, some padrón peppers, crunchy calamari with a saffron aioli and chorizo, offered in either cider or sherry depending on your taste. At the end came a slab of baked Basque cheesecake. There’s a lot of this about at the moment. All too often it can be heavy and mouth-clogging. This was light and creamy and eminently finishable. With it came a glass of Pedro Ximénez sherry, smelling wistfully of Christmas. It was a very good end to a lovely day. Oh and praise be, the tooth held. I think it’s safe for now.