

Let us now praise English food and, yes, especially all those fresh vegetables.

Bull in Moulton, North Yorkshire pub-and-restaurant, admits that didn't learn to cook vegetables new way at the technical college where he studied: he learned at restaurant, where the crisp-tender school had been the style for years. Not everyone is enamored of the style. "Some customers complain vegetables are not well-enough done so we cook them more," he said, "we also get a lot of compliments our vegetables."

Audrey Pagendam, a co-owner the restaurant, said the restaurant had always cooked vegetables lightly. "We have always been criticized for it from every corner," she said. Now, it's usually older people who criticize. "We get orders in kitchen that say 'Vegetables well cooked, please,' and it's underlining she continued. "We've come a long way from prawn cocktail, steak mushrooms — and Black Forest! In addition to the general improvement in English cooking, there is an important reason that does not trail late to small restaurants in some American towns. Most of the pubs England are owned by brewers. Those who lease the pubs are allowed a certain percentage of the profit from selling beer. Serving food was one way for them to make more money. The idea caught on, and, Mr. Hjort of Melton's said, "everybody jumped in, and then there was shake-out and that's when quality came in."

Melton's is not a pub. "The Good Food Guide" awards it a rating of out of a possible 5, which means the food is very good. The restaurant features vegetarian specialties Thursdays, when, the owners say, a third of its customers are vegetarians. Its vegetable plate is good as they get, the rest of its food worth a detour.

Unlike Americans, the British have always loved their vegetables, or they say. The difference is that the vegetables look like vegetables instead of stew.

We could learn a thing or two.

restaurants: stunning platters of grilled vegetables at Riva, an Italian restaurant in Barnes, in southwest London; a delicious mélange of steamed vegetables and vegetable salads at the Ivy, in the West End, and a very good black-bean chili at the Museum Street Cafe, by the British Museum.

But what could the countryside offer? Mostly restaurants with the lowest rating in the guide, which means "competent cooking," but nothing exceptional, or small pubs and restaurants that are not even worthy of a complete entry but instead are given a 15- or 20-word notation.

Since the people in my party were not about to drive more than 10 or 15 miles on the wrong side of the road with a stick shift (also on the wrong side) just for a good dinner, we were at the mercy of these lesser entries. As someone who prefers greens and grains to fish and chips, my hopes were not high.

But from the beginning, there was one pleasant surprise after another. Restaurants cited in the guide provided platters of steaming hot vegetables, perfectly cooked and served with or without butter, with every main course. There were tiny new potatoes, available only in the spring; emerald-green broccoli florets; creamy white cauliflower; snow peas, which the British call mange tout, because you eat all of them; courgettes (zucchini to us); haricots verts; carrots, and asparagus.

"When I first moved here," Mr. Edwards said, "pub food was frozen and processed. But now it's farm-house-fresh things — good basic products, not overcooked."

Mr. Edwards was trained at the Savoy in London. "When you work at a place like the Savoy," he said, "you are shouted at and shouted at and shouted at and end up washing pots and pans and upwards of five boxes of manage tout if you don't do it right. I learned to cook vegetables right."

Michael Hjort, who is the chef and with his wife, Lucy, owner of Melton's, in York, sees the improvement in pub food as "part of a much broader, more cosmopolitan winning and dining in the country."

Stephen Burkitt, chef at the Black

LD prejudices die hard. English food is bad, the conventional thinking goes. Pub food is worse: fish and chips, steak-and-kidney pie, sausage pasties, and vegetables — all frozen — with a gray-green pallor that comes from sitting in the cooking water since morning. For the traveler who wants to eat well, even on vacation, English restaurants are mine fields. Aren't they?

The British are the first to admit their former culinary shortcomings. "Over the past 10 years in this country, the whole picture of eating out has changed miraculously," said Simon Edwards, who cooks with his twin brother, Jonathan, at St. Cuthbert's Inn, a small pub in Scorton, North Yorkshire. "People are demanding higher standards."

Times have changed. If you haven't been to Britain in the last 10 years, that in some ways has outpaced America's. Since the early 1980's, the new British cooking has spread from a few dozen places to hundreds in remote corners all over the country. As in the American culinary revolution it followed, this food is lighter and fresher and relies on regional bounty. Its practitioners are the younger British chefs who have thrown out their gray paste-pots. Now, the revolution has seeped down to the pubs, where food has traditionally been an afterthought to go with a pint of ale. On a trip to London and Yorkshire in May, it was amazing to see how food had improved in pubs and tiny restaurants in the countryside. But even more striking — startling in fact — were the assortments of perfectly cooked vegetables served with every meal.

We chose restaurants with the help of "The Good Food Guide" (published only in England, by the Consumers' Association and Hodder & Stoughton), a restaurant guide that is part Michelin, part Zagat, and depends on its readers to critique the restaurants. Interestingly, the guide notes restaurants that make an effort to accommodate vegetarians.

Tom Jaime, editor of the "The Good Food Guide," said that the vegetarian movement in Britain is significant enough for the guide to cater to. "We almost had to do something about it," he said. He added that the Vegetarian Society claims that 17 percent of the population says it is vegetarian in one fashion or another. As they have in the United States, Britons have become vegetarians for ethical and health reasons: the young, Mr. Jaime said, are against factory farming; the middle-aged are worried about their health.

It wasn't surprising to find wonderful vegetables in London's better restaurants.