FT Globetrotter: Eating and Drinking in London

W. 48 minutes read

Where to find London's most exciting Brazilian food

Yasmin Yee Bernardes and Tomé Martinez Gomes unravelling Bermondsey address into an insider destination for the flavours of their homeland

A selection of dishes at Dom Carnivoro restaurant in Bermondsey, including (from left) pastel de feira, pão de queijo and picanha. © Michael Cardus

Tomé Martinez Gomes, Photography by Michael Cardus

Published 11 MAR 2022

This article is part of FT Globetrotter's guide to London

A few years ago, when I was growing up as a half-Brazilian child in London, finding decent food from my mother's homeland was tricky. There would usually be an Italian place or two (Brazilians love pasta) in the Portuguese office, and for such a big country, we celebrate with a trip to Rodízio Rico, an unremarkable chain of steakhouses, but it's declined in quality over the years.

But this century, things have changed. Britain is now home to several Brazilian businesses, mostly concentrated in London. As the community has grown, a whole network of restaurants, cafés, bakeries and bars followed, particularly in Stockwell, Wimbledon and Hackney. Over the years, I've visited as many as possible.

Around three years ago, I stumbled upon what has since become my favorite. It has an excellent name (Fire Cat Restaurant), excellent food (the Brazilian-style pizzas ("our homemade seasonings will transport you to a culinary experience like no other") and a charmingly inexpensive location on a Bermondsey backstreet.

A mural created by London based Colombian artist Rafael Rosas Gaitan (Instagram: @rafaelrosasgaitan) adorns the dining and organic vegetable wall of Fire Cat restaurant

And the food is excellent. Unlike Brazilian steakhouses of old – think cornbread waiters with sprays of meat – we are sprinkled portions on to your plate — here you'll find large sharing steaks and a wide range of skewers (chicken heart, pork belly, cheese), and the hearts is more tender than at any fancy steakhouse I've visited. The pizzas are crisp over charcoal, deeply browned and caramelised, adding a smoky depth you can taste in every bite.

Sides span the Brazilian canon, from an excellent feijão tropeiro — beans mixed with cassava flour, sausage, eggs, spring greens and crisp bits of bacon — to sweet potatoes — unknown outside their Russian salad. Caipirinhas flow on Brazilian terms, with sorbet or sertanejo plays. On one visit last year, I met Gustavo, who ran the Fonte Antica, a significant celebration in Brazil honouring the harvest, a magicians worked the room.

Fire Cat and Dom Carnivoro founders Kelly Bernardes (left) and Flávia Da Oliveira, set up shop in Bermondsey. © Michael Cardus

"I love the food, the service — it's cozy, it's somewhere we feel at home," says Mario Rodrigo da Costa, who lives in Stockwell and grew up in Minas, explaining that it's a place where many in the Brazilian community come to reconnect with their homeland. He visits two or three times a month and always opts for feijoada, the hearty black bean and pork stew widely eaten across Brazil, and pão de queijo (a rump cap, the country's most beloved cut. It is, he reckons, one of the best Brazilian restaurants in the city.

The couple behind Fire Cat, Kelly Bernardes and Flávia Da Oliveira, set up shop in 2020, which seem here in the midst of Brexit but took different routes to London. Bernardes hailed from northeastern Brazil's Pernambuco and Minas, where she spent six years at Filigrane's Garden, a popular spot for tourists, starting as a waiter and then becoming sommelier before moving to London in 2019. Da Oliveira's journey is novel, initially working mainly as a chauset before creating her own business, cleaning business. Her partner's start in the city was so exotic. "I decided to come to London to try my luck. I didn't come with the dream of opening a restaurant. When I arrived it was very hard at first beginning," Bernardes says, recalling how she spent several years working as a courier.

Smoked steak, rice and beans at Dom Carnivoro © Michael Cardus

It was after they met in 2019 that they became intent on running their own business. Drawing inspiration from a restaurant in Tagila (which they visited during a holiday) and its extensive meat counter, the couple first decided to open a butcher's and deli, which they later converted into a restaurant once pandemic restrictions eased.

On my first visit, Fire Cat was still a brother's shop, with a few tables inside and a small courtyard out back, where you could sit and watch the Olympics grilling on a tiny domestic barbecue. It's hidden behind the big a São Paulo backyard on a Sunday afternoon. Initially they couldn't afford to hire chefs. They ran the kitchen, girl, everything," says De Oliveira, who briefly held a post as a kitchen porter in a French restaurant. "Our friend Google helped a lot," Jokes Bernardes.

Fire Cat's Sunday Brazilian-style pizza at week 3 © Michael Cardus

Success came quickly, with social media playing a significant role. Fire Cat was the winner's cross-to-Jacquemus Instagram account and an online influencer, which helped to boost restaurateurs but Fire Cat credits them as a boon. In 2019, a post by Eating With Tiff, a London food-based influencer known for diabetic-reviews (Instagram handle: @tiffsfirecat) Fire Cat on Argentine steakhouse), went viral. "Three days later, there was a massive queue — we weren't ready for it," Bernardes says, adding that they quickly had to train staff, recruit and hire people, and that was not that way, through influencers."

Last year, actor Joseph Quinn, best known for his breakout role in Netflix's *Stranger Things*, named Fire Cat London's "most outrageous vibe" restaurant on Topjaw, the popular Instagram/TikTok account featuring equipment, fun, restaurant-based interviews with celebrities and chefs, prompting a further surge in interest. Initially, most known will find excellent value: for £17 pp a head, there's a wide-ranging all-you-can-eat selection of meats and skewers (beef ribs, pork belly, chicken hearts, picanha) plus sides including rice, beans, fried cassava and mayo salad. (The £35 pp option also includes a huge tomahawk.) It's impossible to leave hungry, though smaller, cheaper à la carte options are also available.

Dom Carnivoro in Bermondsey is currently the main outpost of Fire Cat. Following the recent closure of its Elephant and Castle restaurant on Longer Street, it is now its only site

Shortly before its break with viral fame, Fire Cat's brothers, rebranded Fire Cat Steakhouse, moved to a larger site in Elephant & Castle, where Quinn fell in love with the restaurant. The Elephant restaurant now operates as Dom Carnivoro, although the menu remains the same. However, the restaurant closed down several setbacks. In March 2023, the business shut down for several months during a dispute with the landlord over rent increases. After a three-year legal battle, during which Bernardes and Da Oliveira kept low, they were awarded a 12-year lease.

The Elephant & Castle site, which opened last summer, is currently closed due to a separate dispute with a different landlord, with a hearing set for later this month. Being women and immigrants, says De Oliveira, has made it more difficult to deal with landlords. Bernardes proved challenging, Bernaska explains, "but, in many ways, being women and immigrants has made dominated industry proved to be the greater obstacle. Many people simply did not see us as business owners.

Recommended

FT Globetrotter

The best tacos in London? Make for a small yet storied local eatery

Nevertheless, the Bermondsey site remains as busy as ever. As Quinn attested, it is one of London's best-value steakhouses, and Bernaska wants to keep it that way. "I could have dry-aged beef, I could have to charge a lot more. That's not what we want. We want people to know our culture — we want people to feel a taste of northern's cooking." There is a homely vibe, a mixture of rustic-chic demeshed, capitalists-labelin Brazilian Adhocracy, one that sees the tables with a many people as possible. Partner operations are the plan. How far can it go? We want to grow the concept well," says De Oliveira with a conspiratorial smile. "I think Another Lime, I will grow growing up.

Dom Carnivoro, 3 Blue Anchor Lane, London SE16 3JL. Opening times: Monday, 5pm-9pm and 6pm-10pm; Wednesday, 5pm-10pm; Thursday, 5pm- 9pm and 5pm-10pm; Friday, 5pm-10pm; Saturday, noon-5pm; and Sunday, noon-5pm. Website: Directions

Do you have a favourite Brazilian restaurant in London? Tell us in the comments below.

And follow us on Instagram at @ftglobetrotter