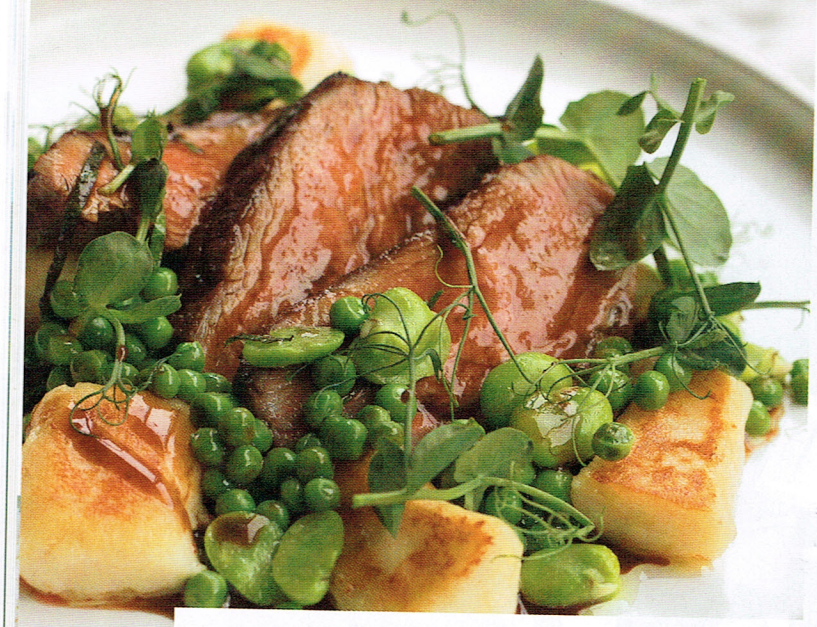

BLANDFORD COMPTOIR ★★

1 Blandford Street, W1U 3DA
020 7935 4626 **£££**

In 2002, aged 23, Xavier Rousset became the world's youngest Master Sommelier: just one highlight on a CV that includes a stint at Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons. Rousset caused shock waves last year when he quit Michelin-starred Texture and 28°-50° (the famous duo he founded with chef Agnar Sverrisson). Blandford Comptoir marks his return to the game, and we reckon it's a winner.

Friendly staff and a creative Mediterranean menu make this casual neighbourhood joint immediately appealing. Marble-topped tables and a smart counter for walk-ins give a classic feel to a small dining room brought bang up to date with its petrol-blues and pristine tiling. The menu by chef Ben Mellor (also ex-28°-50°) focuses on prime ingredients. Sections are headed 'Fish', 'Vegetable' and so on. Most dishes are available in starter or main sizes, so you can choose several small plates to share or the traditional three courses.

We began with thin slivers of raw lamb in a fresh Amalfi lemon and mint dressing, punctuated by intense bursts of caper: the carefully layered flavours showing deft culinary skill. A heartier dish of tender grilled octopus and potatoes epitomised the Med on a plate, bolstered by rich olives and the kind of tomatoes you usually only find in sunny markets on foreign holidays. Closer to home, plump scallops with a light pea velouté and sweet beans reminded us of an English summer garden.

We can also recommend the quail, its rich jus balanced by the lighter texture of a truffle and chicken boudin. It's the perfect match for a surprisingly silky Côtes du Rhône from Rousset's list – which, as you'd hope, is an oenophile's delight. More than 50 Champagnes, 20 interesting by-the-glass choices and knock-out older bottles will see wine-lovers flocking here. Marylebone's bon viveurs have a new reason to celebrate.

WINE LIST Xavier Rousset's reputation rests secure with this carefully curated list, featuring some brilliant choices for both pros and novices. Champagne and Madeira are highlights, along with a fine-wine section packed with real gems. **BEST BUY** *Le Laouzil St-Chinian 2014, Domaine Thierry Navarre, Languedoc-Roussillon, France; £35.*

MUST ORDER Octopus with potatoes and Kalamata olives

CAFÉ MONICO ★★

39-45 Shaftesbury Avenue, W1D 6LA
020 3727 6161 **££**

A classy new brasserie from Soho House, Café Monico brings a much-needed sense of occasion to Shaftesbury Avenue dining. The broad modern British menu adds allure, as does the stylish vibe that befits its location between two major West End theatres.

Carefully following The Ivy blueprint, the interior is a classic mix of dark-green leather, pleated lampshades and white tablecloths. What was Avalon nightclub has had a mezzanine level added, radiating around a central bar and blown-glass chandelier. The finish might be a notch down from Ivy standards, but so are the prices: Soho House has done its homework very carefully. Staff are well-dressed and drilled, jazz bubbles away in the background, and chatter drifts across the low-lit space.

The kitchen is overseen by London veteran Rowley Leigh (founder of Kensington Place and more recently of Le Café Anglais). From options such as devilled lamb's kidneys, chicken paillard, and sea bass with black cabbage, we chose a crispy-topped and creamy spinach lasagne. We also sampled Leigh's signature Parmesan custard and anchovy toast, which turned out to be a meagre portion of flattened, salty soldiers paired with a well-balanced light custard: interesting if forgettable.

To follow, an almost perfectly rendered steak tartare was overwhelmed by (unadvertised) wholegrain mustard, while lamb with merguez sausages, chickpeas and a lightly spiced sauce had appealingly vibrant flavour. The all-too-brief cocktail list offers refined mixes, and the wine list has ample choice for £20-30.

We recommend a mezzanine table by the curtained windows for refined people-watching, or a seat at the back for ensconced escapism. Café Monico should be lauded for providing an accessible slice of classic London on the tourist highway.

MUST ORDER Parmesan custard with anchovy toast

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE **Brasserie Zédel** 020 7734 4888 *Corbin and King's good-value homage to the great Parisian brasseries* **Christopher's** 020 7768 1290 *Theatreland classic celebrating its 25th anniversary* **Joe Allen** 020 3544 6061 *A hit with both actors and audiences*