

FOOD & DRINK

Hurrah! It's impossible to get a table

This week: *Joseph Connolly* leafs through the new menu at The Ivy, London WC2

Ah... The Ivy. How to write about it without invoking a splutter of fin-de-siècle Britishness, in all its tortured spasms of saucer-eyed class anxiety, desperate aspiration, zingy bling and unadorned stupidity...? For nearly two decades, The Ivy was so much more than a mere restaurant: here was not just a temperature gauge for the fevered state of the nation, but a scalpel-sharp arbiter of status: can you get a table or not? Is you is, or is you ain't?

Most people, by definition, ain't – and that's just how everyone liked it. The sainted few who could secure a table at will, and even at short notice, felt suitably superior and cosseted (most of the point of the thing) – and the huddled masses denied the limelight, awed by the restaurant's absolute exclusivity, became even more demotedly determined to get in.

They would be on the telephone pleading for a table for lunch on Tuesday week, maybe... or dinner, conceivably, one Thursday a month hence, or perhaps some time early in the next century – it didn't actually matter, because the response would always be a polite "no".

So things remained throughout the tenure of Chris Corbin and Jeremy King – the architects of The Ivy's phenomenal

success – and well into the ownership of Richard Caring, who also has J Sheekey, Le Caprice and – oh, loads of other very good places. But gradually, The Ivy's star began to wane, thanks to the rise of new and fashionable places (most notably Corbin and King's Wolseley) but also to a self-inflicted wound: the introduction of The Club at The Ivy, where the cream of celeb diners immediately graduated, leaving the restaurant feeling just a little bit B-list. Then C-list.

Suddenly, it was rather easier to bag a table... but the hitherto excluded didn't like this one bit, because if it was no longer the undisputed choice of the beautiful people, then they were damned if they would want to go there either. They wanted to not get a table at the Chiltern Firehouse instead (though that, too has grown a shade more... available, in recent months).

In January of this year, an expensive risk was taken: to shut up shop for a five-month total refurbishment; for all the famous artefacts to be auctioned off, amid a fanfare of publicity. This month sees the opening of a brand spanking new Ivy, still under the directorship of the peerless Fernando Peire, wooed back by Caring in 2007. Yes, but what have we got, though? A mess? A mishmash? A catastrophe? No, no and thrice no – we have an unmitigated triumph, that's what we've got. Oh God, I love it. It is



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so much better than the old and dusty version: at a stroke, The Ivy has become once again one of the very best and buzziest restaurants in town.

It's a funny shape – a snub-nosed triangle. And whereas before it was something of a warren of blind spots and walkways with a bar wedged into the corner, the new bar dominates the very heart of the space – a beautiful Art Deco creation of peachy onyx, mirror, red and pink velvet and leather, with dinky little Lalique-ish lamps.

All now is sweetness and light, courtesy of the trademark harlequin stained glass windows and mighty bronze and glass pendants. Here's the real cleverness, though, the absolute masterstroke: there is no such thing as a "bad table": on whatever green velvet banquettes or red leather chair you are seated, you will feel special.

The menu itself is rather more adventurous than before – with even a nod to

Wreath lecture: The Ivy's new dining room and, below, its renowned shepherd's pie

Asia – but The Ivy has never been about gourmet cooking: simply what people actually want to eat, done extraordinarily well. So all the old favourites are here: the signature shepherd's pie – beef and lamb, and amazing jus: as good as ever. You can dine frugally on sausages and mash or fish and chips with a £19.50 bottle of wine, go nuts with Dover sole, share a whole roast Devonshire chicken... or have what we did: for my guest, an excellent thick sirloin, cooked precisely rare as requested; for me, the finest veal chop I have ever eaten – large, tender, juicy, very deeply flavoured... it left me breathless, not to say full. Top-rate chips as well.

Before that, a little circular cake of finely chopped white crabmeat topped by a perfect creamy mousse made up of the dark Evesham asparagus with utterly lean and nutty prosciutto, and just the ooily gorgeous yolk of a Burford Brown poached egg. Joy upon joy.

Service? Nigh-on perfect. The waiters – in smart Toulouse-Lautrec Moulin Rouge garb – are just friendly enough, and professionally attentive. Glasses are imperceptibly – never aggressively – replenished; but, crucially, never neglected.

For pud we could have had a Knickerbocker Glory – very fitting, I thought – but instead went for a blush apricot tart with amaretti ice cream. This was a kind of individual tarte tatin. Its slightly soggy base and unyielding rim are the nearest I can get to faulting this meal. Just two days after opening, the place was alive with all the old-style cool and razzmatazz, and a smattering of shiny celebs.

The Ivy is back! The Ivy is hot! The Ivy is unutterably fabulous again! And we can't get a table! Yay! All, once more, is right with the world.

Joseph Connolly's A-Z of Eating Out (Thames & Hudson) is available from Telegraph Books.



The new menu is more adventurous, with a nod to Asia



Pint to pint

Our guide to the best British pubs heaves to at The Bridge Inn, Ratho

Do we reach a stage in life that compels us to wave a lot? Clutching my pint outside The Bridge Inn at Ratho, in Midlothian, I'm beginning to wonder if, for me, the moment is nigh.

A narrowboat slips along the adjacent Union Canal. I wave. Dog walkers follow the towpath opposite. I wave. Cyclists whirr past. Wave. Red-faced joggers, power-walkers; up goes the hand. The sequence of greetings is entertainment in itself, but I hope the gestures are taken as me being at ease on a sunny terrace outside a beautiful pub rather than as a draining of faculties.

The Bridge Inn, eight miles west of Edinburgh city centre, is one of Scotland's most decorated pubs, gathering plaudits and awards for Best Food Pub, Dog Friendliest Pub, and Pub of the Year over the past few years. And it deserves every one.

The pub's location is as magnificent as it is practical. Ratho is a delightful village minutes from Edinburgh Airport, and the pub owners' walled garden sitting beyond a clutch of bonny canalside cottages renders the kitchen seasonally self-sufficient.

Its beer is fiercely Scottish – from Fyne Ales, Knops, Alechemy, Arran and Orkney breweries – and the bar food is highlighted by cullen skink, a classic creamy, smoked haddock, potato and leek soup. (A top-notch bistro is part of the set-up, but we've waived that to choose between a bargeman's sandwich – Isle of Mull cheddar and homemade pickle – and

beetroot hummus, olives and peashoots, chased by a "paddle" selection of indigenous ales.)

The pub's ageless barge offers weekend dining trips, with one regular excursion ferrying rugby fans to matches at Murrayfield.

But there is a slight chill coming off the water and, nipping indoors for an alternative to the full-bodied, fruity Skye Blaven (5%), I'm encouraged to take my choice (Cairngorm Black Gold, 4.4%) into a small lounge because "there's a wee fire on in there, so it's nice and comfy". Being more of a bar habitué, I'm content to be part of the mismatched fittings, framed local scenes, solid furniture and undulations of upholstery.

I feel almost as comfortable as the chap beside me with his spread-out newspaper, pint glass acting like a magnifier, flat cap hanging on his chair. An acquaintance crosses the car park and semaphores the universal "ready for another" signal; that unmistakable wiggly hand action and raised eyebrow. Cap man nods and tilts his chestnut-coloured Knops Musselburgh Broke (4.5%) towards his mate. It would appear that good things come in waves.

Alastair Gilmour

The Bridge Inn, Ratho, Midlothian EH28 8RA (0131 333 1320; bridgeinn.com).



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