

A new twist on an old classic works again

Restaurateurs Jeremy King and Chris Corbin are back doing what they do best – offering Londoners more of their high-end glamour

I should love to tell you that it's both brave and cavalier, the way in which London's restaurant trade appears to be laughing in the face of the 'economic climate' by opening a rash of huge and high-end places simply all over the place ... but of course it's all just an accident, really – no more than a cruel trick of timing which could very easily backfire. Because all of these glamorous and pricey new restaurants will have been joyously conceived way back in the good old rosy days, when it wasn't just the fat cats who could only grow fatter. But the division now between those who regularly eat out and those who simply cannot has rarely been wider. McDonald's, KFC and the rest will continue to prosper, while the top ranks who depend upon expense accounts and oligarchs appear to be impregnable (Le Gavroche is booked up two months in advance, just as it always was). But the 'squeezed middle' – decent, ordinary restaurants – is feeling the pinch, though I think that the more reliable mid-price chains will be okay: Cote, Spaghetti House, Jamie's, Strada and the new slew of Steak & Co, which are sprouting up everywhere.

With the exception of Wolfgang Puck's Cut (£85 steaks) all the new and forthcoming restaurants at the upper end seem to be owned either by Richard Caring (of Scott's,

Ivy and J. Sheekey fame) or else Jeremy King and Chris Corbin (creators of the magnificent Wolseley). Caring seems to polarise diners: they are either great admirers of all his works, or else they refuse to have truck with him. The admirers are in the majority – flocking to his newest place, 34, on the corner of Grosvenor Square, as they will to the even newer one coming soon to the site of the Theatre Museum in Covent Garden. All those fans should maybe form a club: they could call it The Caring Society.

And in the right hand corner, we have King and Corbin, about either of whom I have never heard a bad word. They are brilliant at all of this, and each of them a perfect gentleman to boot. Soon to open is a gorgeous art deco delight on the site of the cavernous Atlantic Bar & Grill (in the undercroft of the old Regent Palace Hotel) as well as a confirmed London hotel of their own and a new place in New York. Also coming soon is a giant on Sloane Square, which the duo were delighted to have secured in the face of Caring's characteristically determined bidding – compensation for the fact that he snatched from their jaws the aforementioned Theatre Museum at the eleventh hour. Maybe by way of retaliation, they have recently opened The Delaunay, just around the corner in Aldwych.

Present was the essential smattering of celebs: Stephen Fry, Sebastian Faulks and Fergie, the Duchess of York



■ Joseph Connolly with – if you squint closely – Stephen Fry in the background

They have learned well from the unprecedented misjudgement of the short-lived St Alban in Regent Street: this time, we're back to what they do best – and as a consequence, the first impression of the very fine looking Delaunay is rather disorientating. It's as if The Wolseley has been compacted, reduced in height and recreated as a film set to stand in for the original. So here is the familiar glossy black and white marble floor, the same linen cloths, glasses and cutlery – the chairs, the black fluted columns and the clock on the rear wall. Most tellingly, the central horseshoe of seating has been replicated exactly: no restaurant boasts a more obvious inner sanctum than The Wolseley, to be seated within which bestows an unspoken status. Everyone who goes to either The Wolseley or Delaunay (where the welcome and service are equally superb) is made to feel special ... it's

just that some are more special than others.

The Wolseley was modelled on the great and glamorous Viennese cafes, and here the accent is even more pronounced: a very Mittel European menu indeed, packed with Wieners, wurst, sauerkraut, stroganoff, Salzburg soufflé, Scheiterhaufen and Hungarian this and that, as well as more regular brasserie fare. At lunchtime you can have anything from a £6.75 grilled chicken sandwich to 50g of Beluga for £235. There's also a daily special featuring such comforts as Lancashire Hotpot. The place was packed – and present too was the essential smattering of celebs: Stephen Fry (you can glimpse him in the photo, if you squint) and Sebastian Faulks – both of whom I know just a little bit – and Fergie, whom I decidedly don't. Fergie as in the lady who for some reason we are still expected to address as the Duchess of York. She was with a motley of maybe

entrepreneurs, possibly discussing how to dodge twenty-two years in a Turkish jail, or conceivably negotiating access to the Queen's bedchamber in return for a consideration, all profits from which could well be ploughed back into, oh, I don't know ... The Caring Society, say.

Moreish

I was with my plutocratic lunching chum (Pluto, for short) and he was very much enjoying his crab cocktail – large and excellent, plenty of solely white meat and a not over aggressive sauce (the dark meat combined with mayonnaise, I'd say) served in a great silver coupe. I had something called tarte flambee – rather curious: a large paper-thin disc of quickly crisped dough, alive with crumbs and nuggets of smoked bacon, shallots and parmesan: lovely umami flavour, and therefore very moreish indeed. Pluto then had the dish of

the day: grilled haddock fillet with cherry tomatoes, borlotti beans and spinach as fresh as Popeye's. It was cooked just the way he likes it: i.e. barely cooked at all – very glossy and chunky. My beef stoganoff was a welcome old friend – can't remember the last time I had that. It came in its oval copper cooking casserole, and one ladles all of that on to an identically sized plate: each grain of the accompanying rice was separate and fluffed, each ribbon of beef fatless and tender, the rich and creamy sauce so very rich and creamy as to leave you in no doubt that you were in the middle of a treat. And by way of a flagrant demonstration of greed, we shared a wedge of Sachertorte: very dark and seriously chocolate – as good as you'll get in London (though not Austria – and nor as good as they used to be in Fortnum & Mason, in the days when they did all such things just perfectly).

It's called Delaunay because – like Wolseley – it's an old (French, this time) motor car. A revered marque indeed – and although I can't quite say that The Delaunay is the Rolls-Royce of restaurants, it still really is quite a slick limousine.

■ All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

FACTFILE

THE DELAUNAY

55 Aldwych, WC2

Tel: 020-7499 8558

■ Open Monday-Friday 7am-midnight. Saturday 8am-midnight. Sunday 11am-11pm

■ Food: ★★★★★☆

■ Service: ★★★★★☆

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆

■ Cost: Not by any means cheap, but you can have as little as you want. About £125 for a three course meal for two with wine.

promotion of affordable yet interesting regional selection

And there is a bit of a personality cult associated with them (see the website at <http://lespritdebordeaux.com/>). But why not – that makes the drinking more interesting.

When the growers came to London, I talked longest to Pierre Taix, of Chateau Gaudet Plaisance in Montagne-Saint-Emilion, who is far from a mainstream grower.

His mother is from Bordeaux but his father's roots are much further east – in Corréze – from whence comes the oak for many of the best wine barrels. Pierre worked in finance in Paris before returning to the vines and he's

an individualist. Not for him the involvement of a "guru" consultant. He wants to make wines which reflect the different terroirs of his vineyards and prove that the satellite appellations of Saint-Emilion deserve high respect.

At Gaudet Plaisance, he has set about improving the vineyard following organic principles – an approach which isn't fashionable in Bordeaux. "It's different from Burgundy or Alsace – none of the big names is organic," he said.

The proof of L'Esprit's united yet diverse approach is, of course, in the drinking. The

launch event showcased 2009 and 2010 bottles from each participating chateau. It was a happy experience: these are very good wines. Though the 2009s will live for years and are likely to improve, many are very enjoyable already. The 2010s will need more patience, but will richly reward it.

L'Esprit wines will be spreading through independent merchants and restaurants but you can start the 2009 experience now. Soho Wine Supply in Percy Street, just off Tottenham Court Road (020-7636 8490/www.sohowine.co.uk) has almost all of them – Chateau Gaudet

Plaisance (£14) and the Saint-Emilion Grand Cru Chateau du Val d'Or (£19.50) are two which meet the quality/affordable price criterion very well.

■ Now, out with your wine tasting diaries. The pre-Valentine's tasting at Maida Vale's lovely wine shop, The Winery, will include a host of romantic delights, from pink champagne to German pinot noir. It's at Clifton Nurseries on February 8. Tickets are £25. Visit www.thewineryuk.com or call 020-7286 6475 for more information. And, at the shop in Clifton Road on January 31, fine German dry rieslings will be open.



■ Pierre Taix in the Chateau Gaudet Plaisance vineyard

Picture: Richard Nourry