

Made in Lancashire: chic new West End restaurant

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In mid-November Chris Corbin and Jeremy King will open St Alban in Regent Street, their fifth restaurant together in a remarkable working partnership that stretches back more than 25 years.

Given their level of professionalism and attention to detail, it is more than likely that St Alban will be as successful as Le Caprice, The Ivy and J Sheekey, the restaurants they sold, and The Wolseley which they currently manage, to full houses. But a significant difference in this new restaurant will be the part played by a team of builders, joiners and craftsmen normally based in a 28,000 sq ft office and workshop that is part of a former textile mill 180 miles away in Eccles, south Lancashire. (The town which has also given the world the famous Eccles cake made at St John EC1 using puff pastry instead of the traditional lard and currants and served with crumbly Lancashire cheese.)

I first heard of this connection when Corbin rang me from a train heading to Manchester, my home town, in search of a restaurant recommendation for lunch. I directed him to the Chinese restaurants in and around George Street and was keen to discover what this dapper southerner was doing so far north. The mobile connection went before he could tell me more.

A week later, before one of our infrequent lunches, Corbin took me round the nascent St Alban, a corner site with the benefit of natural light on two sides and unusually good vehicular access at the rear from its days as a BBC radio theatre and recording studio. Enhanced by the work of the architects, Stiff & Trevillion and specially commissioned artwork, it will undoubtedly look and feel impressive. As Corbin led me into the kitchen he explained two new managerial opportunities he and King will face. For the first time the kitchens will be on the same level as the restaurant, rather than in the basement as in their previous restaurants, and the entire kitchen range will use induction heating which should provide a significant energy saving.

Over lunch Corbin told me more about the new restaurant's menu. The chef will be Francesco Mazzei, whose cooking I have enjoyed at Franco's in Jermyn Street; the inspiration for his menus will be a broad geographical sweep from Venice to Lisbon; and, most excitingly of all, tucked into the kitchen there will be a Jospier grill.

These remarkable grills are manufactured in Barcelona, Spain (www.jospier.es) and manage to imbue whatever is cooked on them with great flavour, most memorably the meat I ate at Goodman's Steakhouse in Moscow. Corbin, who had just returned from a trip to Barcelona was, however, extolling the delights of a monkfish tail cooked on his new grill as well as the potatoes, left overnight on the top of the grill and then slowly cooked round the perimeter of the grill the following day.

But none of this would be materialising without the seemingly happy band of men from Eccles who were swarming over the site that would soon materialise as St Alban when I was there. To discover more precisely what they were doing so far from home I met up with one of PBH Shopfitters' directors, Steve Moss, for a coffee in The Wolseley, whose refurbishment Moss had also supervised.

Moss began by explaining that although the site belonged to CKL Restaurants Ltd, Corbin and King's company, for the rest of the lease it was currently their responsibility. "Once we win the contract to renovate the site, the building is ours. We are responsible for all the work that is undertaken there until what is known as practical completion. Then we hand the building back to the restaurateurs and they move in to commission the equipment, start the staff training and get everything ready for a 'soft opening' which will probably be in early November."

And while Moss has been supervising builders, joiners, plumbers, engineers and the construction of the kitchen since late July his counterparts in Eccles have been playing their part, too. "We are not designers," Moss explained, "but our job is to make the designs work because initially what we receive may be visually fantastic but quite impractical. The drawing work has taken over eight weeks before it was finally approved as we try and incorporate not just what the designers want but also what the restaurateurs believe will make their staff's job more efficient."

"The reason Corbin was up in our workshop in Eccles the last time was to go through the design of the waiter stations in detail. The apertures for the salt and pepper pots have to be just so, as do the drawers for the cutlery and just how the glasses will be displayed. I have never worked with anyone so obsessed with detail as these two. Even when we were digging up the floor at St Alban they came and set up a restaurant table to make sure that the proposed tablecloth would hang correctly."

As Moss's foreman has supervised the building work, the interior of the new restaurant has been taking shape in Eccles. "We have been building the reception desk, the dispense bar, the feature panels round the entrance, the new domed ceiling and all the fixtures for the cloakroom," Moss continued. "And as the site gradually becomes clearer we initially send one van down a week with all the furniture but towards the end there is a van coming down every couple of days which incurs a huge number of parking tickets. This is a more complicated process than most because we have to scribe all the furniture, once it arrives, to make sure it fits correctly, then we have to send it off to another workshop in Chelsea to be lacquered and only when it comes back from there can we fit it permanently."

But who, I wanted to know, actually carries out all this work? Moss smiled before continuing, "We can pick up jobs down south because even though we have to put up our lads when they are away from home we tend to be more competitive than the London firms. In fact, the rule in our business seems to be that Londoners work up north, Northerners work down south and Scots work everywhere. Jobs like these are really a young man's game and it's a situation that seems to benefit everyone. They like to get the opportunity to work away from home and we certainly get more out of them because they are away from home. They all stay in bed and breakfasts around Paddington, an area that has become a real home from home for many contractors working in London."

As Moss looked around a busy Wolseley he smiled with obvious satisfaction at seeing so many people enjoying the results of his team's physical hard work. "We have done a lot in this square mile recently. It's a nice area and it's a real pleasure to be working with people who are so obsessed with quality."

St Alban 4-12 Regent Street, London SW1Y 4PE
Open lunch and dinner 7 days.