

## When Arbutus spawned Wild Honey

14 Dec 2007 by Nick Lander/ BA Business Life

Regent Street curves in an elegant quarter circle from Piccadilly Circus to Oxford Circus and conveniently separates two distinct areas of London.

To the east is Soho, home to numerous media companies, advertising agencies and those companies ancillary to the film and television world. To the west is Mayfair, whose broader streets now house numerous hedge fund managers, merchant banks and, not surprisingly, the odd legal eagle. Despite their proximity, Regent Street provides a strong delineation between the two.

Soho has by far the longer history of restaurants because it was here that so many of the European émigrés settled after the war. But since 1995 there has been a huge rise in the number of restaurants in Mayfair, which now include The Square, Bellamy's, Benares and Tamarind, Nobu Berkeley, Alloro, Automat and Cipriani. But restaurateurs have not tended to open in both Soho and Mayfair, preferring instead to stick to the market they know better.

Earlier this year, however, chef Anthony Demetre and his restaurateur partner Will Smith opened Wild Honey on St George's Street, Mayfair, equidistant from Vogue House and auctioneers Sotheby's. They did so building on the success of Arbutus, which they had opened in Frith Street, Soho, in May 2006, and which has flourished on the basis of a simple but immediately popular formula. Demetre and his brigade supplies the 'affordable good food' which packs lots of flavour but eschews potentially expensive amuses- bouches and petits fours while Smith and his front-of-house team ensure prompt, personable service and a terrific wine list where all 40 wines are offered by the 250ml carafe. Despite the absence of a sommelier, tablecloths and even sideplates (subsequently introduced), Arbutus justifiably won a Michelin star within a year.

Demetre and Smith jumped at the opportunity of taking over the former private club known as Drones. They promptly changed its name, somewhat obtusely, to Wild Honey (the connection is that drones are worker bees) and assumed that as both sites were no more than 10 minutes' walk from one another they could easily replicate their initial success. But, they now openly acknowledge, they did not grasp quite how wide the divide between Soho and Mayfair really is.

The first criticisms, Demetre explained, came from the many who had enjoyed Arbutus and were expecting more of the same. But while the Soho restaurant is simply decorated and noisy, as befits the area, Wild Honey boasts comfortable booths, plush wooden panelling and an elegant bar. Their initial clientele felt somewhat betrayed.

Nor, Demetre continued, were their new neighbours immediately delighted. The new kitchen was soon to discover that while their Soho customers obviously did not like to be kept waiting, their Mayfair clientele wanted even speedier service, a very obvious sign of the 'cash rich, time poor syndrome' that goes with the surrounding professions.

And the menu quickly had to be adjusted. Bavette, an inexpensive but distinctly flavourful cut of beef that has become a French bistro classic, is the most popular dish at Arbutus where Demetre can often sell over 200 portions a week. At Wild Honey he barely sold 10 portions in the first few weeks and it quickly came off the menu.

The fact that there is an obviously much larger Jewish contingent in Mayfair than Soho has also meant that Demetre has been forced to reduce the number of pork dishes he offers and not even bother with either tripe or fresh eel, both of which sell well in Soho. Even game, which he personally loves to cook, will be reserved for Arbutus rather than Wild Honey. Inexpensive fish such as gurnard and pollock, hugely popular at Arbutus, have given way to tuna at Wild Honey where there is also a much stronger demand for the top wines of Bordeaux and Burgundy, a demand exemplified when two men came in and spent over £600 on dinner at the bar.

Demetre and Smith now realise that they have two excellent but very different restaurants in Arbutus and Wild Honey, separated only by a 10 minute walk across Regent Street.

**Arbutus**, 63/4 Frith Street, Soho, 020-7734 4545,  
**Wild Honey**, 12 St George Street, Mayfair, 020-7758 9160.  
Both open lunch and dinner 7 days.