

## The start of a revolution in King's Cross?

12 Apr 2008 by Nick Lander/ FT

As we walked along the short passageway that leads from the kitchen to the Number Twelve restaurant in The Ambassadors Hotel in Bloomsbury, central London, its normally loquacious chef Santino Busciglio stopped talking, put his head in his hands, and groaned, "Oh, no."

We had just passed a wall on which, as in so many kitchens around the world, were pinned up photographs and corresponding names of the main national newspaper critics so that waiting staff would recognise them whichever name they had booked in. When I asked Busciglio about this he had replied, "Well, we have to be prepared." I then told him who I was and what I wrote about.

I had been invited to see the kitchen after I'd paid for my first meal there when Busciglio had come up to our table, introduced himself and asked whether we had enjoyed his food. "I think this is an important part of my job," he had added subsequently, "because what I want to do as well as cooking the best Italian food possible is to change the perception of what people can expect when they choose to go out and eat in an hotel, to make it more friendly."

In both these ambitions Busciglio is aiming high but what is as equally exciting about what he and his team of 20 Italian chefs are cooking is where they are endeavouring to do this.

Bloomsbury may be one of the best known of London's 'villages', particularly among the literati, but it has never been renowned for an abundance of exciting places in which to eat or drink well. Distinctly charming but definitely down at heel, most of its cafes and restaurants with the exception of Cigala in Lamb's Conduit Street have tended to mirror the rather dowdy facades of the neighbouring hotels. Overall they could best be described as cheap and cheerful.

This is now about to change as hoteliers in particular appreciate Bloomsbury's proximity to the West End and the City. And, perhaps most importantly, it lies just south of the Marylebone Road and consequently within walking distance of the recently revamped St Pancras station as well as King's Cross and Euston stations, both soon to undergo long overdue facelifts.

Dilip Kaneira, the owner of The Ambassadors which is diagonally opposite Euston, has spent over £7 million refurbishing the 100 bedrooms of this now four star hotel. But with equal foresight he brought in Busciglio to design the layout of the kitchens seven months before it re-opened last October which means that it is fully capable of delivering the novel culinary approach Busciglio aspires to, of serving predominantly Italian food but using principally British ingredients.

In doing so, Busciglio 42, seems to be recreating his own life. Born in Sicily, he came to the UK as a baby and grew up in Bolton in Lancashire, a location that has imbued him with the overriding importance of 'value for money'. "I never really tasted any English food until I was 16 and I was always known as 'the Italian' by my school friends. Then when I went to work in Italian restaurants I was always known as 'the Englishman' by my Italian colleagues," he explained.

He was, however, determined to succeed and when his first Head Chef in Manchester told him that the only way to become a good chef in those days was to leave the UK he went to work in France and Belgium for seven years before returning to stints at Alloro, Zafferano and Rosemarino in London.

Busciglio acknowledges that he is not the first Italian chef to take advantage of the increasingly broad range of good British produce – "we are standing on other peoples' shoulders" is the phrase he uses to describe his approach to his fellow chefs – but the results are compelling. The highlights of our first meal included a cream of spring vegetable soup enlivened by basil and soured mascarpone cheese; the creamy burrata cheese from Puglia in southern Italy alongside diced, roast English beetroot; and a fillet of Cornish sea bass with a round of samphire, topped with thinly sliced courgettes and a thick, verdant watercress sauce. The very Italian buttermilk panna cotta with English rhubarb was also first class, as were the triangular lemon polenta cakes with coffee.

All of which were compelling reasons to return for dinner even if the room is nothing like as intriguing as the food. While in the day it has the benefit of a considerable amount of natural light from its windows, in the evening it is vaguely canteen-like and is too obviously the result of a layout created on someone's computer screen. Too many of its artefacts, its vases, lights, decanter, are in serried ranks and fail to exude any warmth (although Busciglio told me that he hopes this will be improved soon, as will the wine list).

But the food on our return was equally impressive. Seared tuna came with a Sicilian sweet and sour fennel salad that I was more than happy to copy at home subsequently. Irish salmon was prepared as a terrine, a tartare and cold smoked. Orkney Island scallops came with courgettes, plum tomatoes and broad beans, a red onion tart was served on melted fonduta cheese with white onions, and Scottish beef with celeriac and wild mushrooms certainly showed British ingredients at their best. Afterwards their ice creams and sorbets made a refreshing dessert.

The combination of this food and the hotel's location has brought a specific type of customer which initially worried Busciglio. "As a chef you're always anxious when you see anyone coming in to eat on their own because you always assume that they are inspectors or critics. But since we opened last October we have always had a constant stream of business people coming in their own in the early evening to eat here before they catch their train home or the sleeper from King's Cross. It's very satisfying."

The quality of the food aside, there are two other perhaps even more exciting consequences to the emergence of Number Twelve.

The first is that in switching from working only in restaurants to taking on a position in an hotel, Busciglio has made an unusual career move as chefs invariably stick to one or the other. "I wanted to take on a more holistic approach to cooking," he explained. "I wanted to be responsible for all the bread we make, the croissants for our guests' breakfast, to smoke our own bacon and ham. It's been a very rewarding challenge."

If Busciglio's example is followed by others it will definitely be a positive step for British hospitality. But the even bigger benefit is that in setting such high standards, Number Twelve has laid down a challenge for all the other hoteliers and developers who are looking to open in the Bloomsbury/ King's Cross area over the next few years. Here is a very high standard of cooking at fair prices which they will all have to equal or better.

The Ambassadors Hotel, [www.ambassadors.co.uk](http://www.ambassadors.co.uk)

Number Twelve Restaurant, [www.numbertwelverestaurant.co.uk](http://www.numbertwelverestaurant.co.uk)