

## How to win at Aspinalls

21 Jun 2008 by Nick Lander/ FT

As we were enjoying our lunch, a breast of veal carved from the roasting trolley, an expensively dressed man suddenly got up from the table diagonally opposite and said to his companion, "I feel lucky right now," and walked off through an archway. He came back about 10 minutes later just as the waiter was delivering two impressive looking lobsters to his table.

Over dinner on my second visit to Aspinalls, the long-established gaming club in Mayfair, this scene was repeated at several tables. While anyone eating out in restaurants regularly today has got used to the phenomenon of guests wandering out with a glass of wine for a quick cigarette break, here a similar phenomenon is even more widespread as the customers individually or collectively go off to do battle with Lady Luck. Or, as I saw in one instance, even leave their attractive dining partner to join a group of friends who materialised from the gaming room to loom over him, apparently in need of the funds that appeared to be in his jacket pocket.

Although Aspinalls remains primarily a members' club (with a membership fee of £1,000 and the usual vetting procedure for prospective members) a simpler approach now applies to anyone going there to dine but not to gamble. The essential criteria are that a reservation must be made in advance and that while standing at the plush reception desk (next to an impressive tank which houses, I was reliably informed, the best-fed fish in London) you complete and sign a form.

Since last summer Aspinalls' latest attraction for the non-gambler has been the arrival of its new chef, Alberico Penati, although Penati is not new to London. For the last 20 years, Penati, 51, has been the chef at Harry's Bar, the private members' club not more than a long stone's throw away in Mayfair, as well as being responsible for all the kitchens in the clubs that once belonged to the late Mark Birley. When these were sold a year ago, Penati decided to move on, if not that far.

Hiring Penati was a clever move on Damian Aspinall's part. Although a career in private clubs has meant that Penati remains one of the few talented chefs rarely to be written about for his culinary skills, he has always been extremely highly rated by his fellow professionals. When Joël Robuchon, perhaps the world's most respected chef, decided to hold a 60<sup>th</sup> birthday dinner in Paris for the twelve chefs who had worked with him most closely during his career, it was Penati he asked to cook the meal, which, surprisingly perhaps for such a renowned French chef, was predominantly Italian in content.

Over the years Penati has built up an enviable address book filled with the best producers in Italy and a reputation for extracting the truest flavours from whatever he cooks. He explained his enthusiasm for his new role by saying, "I'm glad to be back working for a family business where I can encourage the best artisanal producers. That's what excites me."

Over the past year Penati has been busy converting the restaurant at Aspinalls into a close replica of Harry's Bar, albeit with more comfortable (longer-legged) chairs. And while Birley was a master of creating intimacy out of the smallest spaces, here there is a very spacious bar on the ground floor, a bar adorned, not surprisingly given the Aspinalls's long connection to the animal kingdom, with pictures of wild animals.

The waiters here and upstairs wear the cream jackets, white shirts and black ties that have become synonymous with so many distinguished Italian restaurants and each table is decorated with not only a small statue of another wild animal but also a small round board of bresaola and crisp grissini which are soon joined by a bowl of chunks of aged Parmesan. Whether you've come from the gaming table or not, it is best to arrive hungry.

The dishes on the menu at Alberico at Aspinalls bear a very strong resemblance to what Penati used to cook at Harry's Bar although happily all the dishes here are in both Italian and English. Its structure is classically Italian with antipasti, first courses that are either risotto or pasta based and a wide range of meat dishes prepared for two, such as a leg of Abruzzo lamb or beef from Tuscany or Piedmont and then another long list of individual fish or meat dishes.

Dinner began and ended very impressively. Our two starters were a crab salad with mangoes, peas and rocket whose freshness was enhanced by a lemon vinaigrette which the waiter suggested and then whipped up within seconds of delivering the dish, and three thick slices of eel with thyme polenta served with the sweet and sour sauce that is one of the distinguishing features of classic Venetian cooking.

No sooner, however, had these plates been taken away and we were beginning to enjoy the Il Molino di Grace 2004 Chianti Classico, which at £40 is excellent value (the wine list has other good-value wines as well as some far more expensive bottles for the high rollers), than the waiters were back again with our main courses. Was this haste, I wondered, the norm to ensure we returned to the tables as soon as possible? Whatever the reason, neither dish had been allowed enough time and a risotto of broad beans was slightly too al dente, as were some of the pieces of squid, bass and lobster served in an otherwise invigorating fish stock that formed the elegant base of a Mediterranean fish stew.

Having paused and watched for a while, with no yen for the gaming rooms, we then ordered some ice creams and sorbets, another of Penati's trademarks, and the apricot sorbet was the purest I had ever tasted, a thrilling essence of this fruit with just the right amount of acidity for balance. When I complimented him on this particular dish, he explained its freshness. "We make seven litres of ice cream and sorbet every morning so that they are always as fresh as possible. But although that is what I've been used to, there are some very new challenges running a restaurant in a casino. The kitchens have to stay open for much longer than in normal restaurants now that the club is open until 6am every day. There are 180 staff to feed, which includes all the croupiers, who have to take a break every hour and who seem to be permanently hungry. And finally, I'm trying to improve the Chinese and Middle Eastern menus which we also offer, styles of cooking which have not been my particular speciality. Well, not yet, anyway," he added with a smile.

Our dinner for two with wine but no coffee came to £157 including service (although annoyingly the credit card slip is not closed off), which was not excessive given the elegance of the room or the quality of most of the cooking and the ingredients. And there is an added bonus of picking up one of the copies of Aspinalls' brief guide to Responsible Gaming that are on offer in the lavatories - although judging by fact that most copies were stuck together, few visitors seem to have touched them for quite a while.

**Aspinalls Club**, 27-28 Curzon Street, London W1J 7TJ, 020 7499 4599

Open 7 days, noon to 6am.