

## The flames chefs fear

9 Aug 2008 by Nick Lander/ FT

Fire defines the chef's profession but also closes numerous restaurants, Nicholas Lander discovers.

Fire is obviously the element which defines the chef's profession, as it defined the vital stage in mankind's evolution thousands of years ago. But it can also close down restaurants with more frequency and more serious consequences than any other.

My call to book a table at Limón, a highly regarded Peruvian restaurant in San Francisco, elicited no more than the ringing tone and I was to learn subsequently that a recent fire was the cause. In May [Tate Restaurants](#) suffered a major fire in their outpost in the Bluecoat arts centre in Liverpool just six weeks after opening and will not reopen until November thereby missing most of Liverpool's year as European Capital of Culture, although fortunately it occurred early in the morning and no-one was hurt. Within weeks of its opening, and with a million pounds spent on the kitchen alone, Cha Cha Moon, [Alan Yau's](#) new, noisy noodle restaurant in Soho, had to close temporarily because of fire. In their time, London's [Pied à Terre](#) and The Ivy have also been forced to close for the same reason.

Our increasing appetite for food that is quickly grilled or sautéed at very high temperatures is obviously one reason why these events seem to be happening with more frequency. Grease, or something flammable, caught in the ventilation shaft above where this type of cooking takes place, is the most common cause although restaurants do have maintenance contracts to keep these clean and free from contamination, work that takes place after the kitchen has closed for the night.

The most high-profile restaurant casualty due to fire in London at the moment is, sadly, the River Café in Hammersmith, which has been closed since early April and will not re-open before the first week of September.

Even three months later, Rose Gray, one of its co-proprietors, can vividly recall the moment. "It was 7.30pm on a Saturday night, there were about 50 customers in the restaurant already and we were, of course, fully booked," she explained. "For several weeks we had been cooking the proper bistecca alla Fiorentina on the open grill and I think that what happened is that some flaring steak vapours got caught in the flue and just caught fire. The chef who was working the grill at the time said it exploded like a jet plane. We evacuated everyone very quickly and the fire brigade arrived just as promptly. After they had done such a good job the firemen happily finished off all the shins of veal and the plates of chocolate nemesis that we had hoped to sell that evening."

The River Café's long closure has been dictated not just by the rebuilding process and the fact that every single surface was covered in soot from the smoke damage but also because Gray and her partner, Ruth Rogers, are using the closure to incorporate some new design features. A bigger bar; a new, specially built wood-burning oven; a room specifically designed for curing cheeses, and a Chef's Table close to the kitchen will all be on show from September as Gray wants to add more finesse to what they have been doing so successfully over the past 21 years.

However comprehensive the insurance may be, and in this particular case the staff's wages were covered so most will return, what any chef or restaurateur misses when forced to close under such circumstances are, most obviously, the contact with their customers as well as the fun and excitement of working as a team to ensure that their customers leave happy.

These were the sentiments Gray referred to when, dressed as elegantly as ever in her chef's whites, she got up to speak at a recent charity dinner to raise money for cancer research at London's Royal Marsden Hospital (where she has been a patient) in the most unlikely of venues.

This was the Support Centre of the HQ of Carphone Warehouse in west London, which had been kindly made available by its chief executive, Charles Dunstan, who described himself, in something of an understatement according to one of his colleagues, as a 'River Café enthusiast'. Sitting on benches and facing a vast, empty Customer Services office which is divided into various teams by overhead signs that describe them as 'The Troopers', 'The Good, The Bad and The Customers' and 'The Ying Yangs', 210 other enthusiasts sat down to a dinner which revealed that, despite this hiatus, neither the River Café kitchen nor its waiting staff had lost their touch. The chocolate nemesis was as good as those the firemen must have enjoyed while the wild Scottish salmon baked in sea salt and the scallops with anchovies and capers were definitely its match. But what was most impressive was the pasta course, spaghetti with Devon crab, fennel and lemon seeds, which for such a number and with a vast distance to cover between the kitchen and the temporary restaurant was a great feat of professionalism.

Renovating what is now the comfortable and very good value Princess Victoria in Shepherd's Bush, west London, as a highly distinctive and atmospheric venue for his own professional skills and passions had been the driving force behind [Matt Wilkin's](#) decision to set up on his own. But a fire before he had even finished the building work seriously delayed the opening until early June this year although, on the evidence of what we ate and drank, it has not affected his or his staff's enthusiasm.

Australian-born Wilkin came to prominence as the sommelier at The Capital Hotel in London's Knightsbridge before a stint in the wine trade. But while there he kept looking out for a site that could fulfil his dreams of serving good food, a very broad range of wines that include many of his personal favourites such as some delicious Pinot Noirs and Rieslings from around the world, and at the same time pass on some of his accumulated knowledge of food and wine in a distinctive fashion.

The Princess Victoria, built in 1829 (and originally recorded as a 'dram shop') fits this bill perfectly. It is a handsome corner building on the Uxbridge Road with ample natural light into the bar at the front and the dining room at the rear. Wilkin has filled it with sympathetic furniture while his chef, James McLean, has produced an elegant, short menu that offers strong flavours and excellent value for money.

But all this could just as easily have gone up in smoke. In the middle of its renovation, Wilkin discovered that a group of youths had broken into his premises and lit a series of fires on the ground floor. Most extinguished themselves except for one which took hold and tore out through the second floor roof causing over £100,000 worth of damage and serious delays not just to the opening but the planned redevelopment of the gardens and the proposed four bedrooms with which Wilkin wants to entice overseas winemakers visiting London.

We left the Princess Victoria excited by the food, wine and above all the speedy service now that Wilkin is back looking after customers and is obviously such an inspiration to his team. But after all that the restaurant has suffered from fire recently, is it really that sensible to decorate the dining room with so many candles?

**The River Café**, [www.rivercafe.co.uk](http://www.rivercafe.co.uk)

**The Princess Victoria**, 217 Uxbridge Road, London W12 9DH 020-8749 5886.