

London's top restaurant PR

18 Mar 2006 by JR

Maureen Mills eats out in restaurants more times in a week than anyone I have ever met. "It must be nine or ten times a week," she calculated with a smile, "although I tell my son that that's why God invented chefs - so his mother doesn't have to cook."

Mills eats out for pleasure but primarily for business, having started her own PR agency, Network London specialising in promoting restaurants and chefs, ten years ago. She is now widely recognised as not only the most experienced but also the most enthusiastic eater amongst this rapidly growing band of professionals that is dominated by bright and – Mills is the first to admit this – primarily younger women.

"I'm 51 and although I don't know many of the others in my field I do feel a bit like a granny compared to the rest. But that's OK. I keep myself to myself and I have a rather particular way of working that seems to be effective. Later this afternoon I'm off to see a major London hotel that is about to re-launch itself and its restaurants but I've already told them that I don't do 'beauty parades' where they seek submissions and proposals from a long list of interested parties. If I like them and they like me then that's a good start. Another thing I never do is to respond when a restaurateur calls to say they have parted company with their PR and asks me to take over."

I caught up with Mills, over lunch of course, at **Sketch** whose reputation she has managed to turn around over the past two years so that its restaurant is now better known for its food and its exciting association with French chef Pierre Gagnaire than for its prices, although it is expensive nonetheless. Accepting a complimentary glass of champagne, Mills explained that this was definitely a perk of the job but that she carefully avoided the issue of too many drinks by driving to most places. She would not, however, be driving to dinner later that evening at **Le Gavroche**, she confessed.

Mills' approach means that she now represents 17 different restaurants, a mixture of the well established, the new and those she considers the kind of places she would happily eat at most days of the week. It's a roll call that includes Nigel Platts- Martin's restaurant group which encompasses **The Square** and **Chez Bruce** amongst others; chefs **Giorgio Locatelli** and **Tom Aikens**; the equally good- value **Racine** in Knightsbridge and **Galvin** on Baker Street; and Mike Lucy's café operations which will open in the new Roundhouse in Camden Town in late May.

Mills has earned this standing through a combination of tireless eating out in the restaurants of those she doesn't represent as much as those she does, combined with a North American directness of approach. "I'm the first to admit that I'm very opinionated but I believe that in the business I'm in this is a good thing. People trust me because they know I eat around."

It is a pastime she has been indulging in for almost 25 years since Mills began working in hotel PR in her native Toronto, Canada and then for British Airways in London. "I was in a very privileged position," she explained. "I was in my late 20s and working in an arena that involved free tickets, discounted hotels and access to lots of good restaurants. My greedy approach to restaurants just got greedier."

Mills returned to London and spent several years writing for and editing such publications as the *Wall Street Journal* and *Where London* magazine before setting up on her own, essential prerequisites for the PR world, she believes. "What is frustrating about PR in comparison to journalism for example is that it is never ever finished, you can never do enough."

Her approach to ensuring that her clients' message gets across is, as a result, somewhat unorthodox. "Ninety- nine per cent of what I do is chat. I'm there all the time for anyone who wants to talk to me and, as a result, a lot of restaurateurs and chefs just phone up and say 'I just want to pick your brains.' Of course we send out press releases – there should always be something on file for every journalist – but we don't bother with mass mailings."

When I ask Mills what any restaurateur will have to pay for the privilege of her services she replies, "Anything from one to three thousand pounds a month but this invariably depends on the layers of management and consequently the number of meetings that will be involved. But with this come other services as well, most notably my work as an unofficial recruitment agency. Clients tell me when they are looking for a pastry chef, a sommelier or a manager and chefs confide in me when they are thinking of moving on. I had lunch last week with Bjorn van der Horst who just left **The Greenhouse**. He wants to set up on his own and he has the financial backing but he wanted to ask my opinion on a couple of possible sites. I advised him against them both. I hope he succeeds, he's another excellent chef."

But what, I wanted to know, have been the most positive changes in London restaurants and where was there still room for improvement? Mills smiled but promptly launched into her opinions. "The most obvious improvement has been the decline in 'the celebrity chef' which is great. Allied to this is the new informality about so many good new restaurants. I am particularly impressed with **Canteen** which I don't represent but where I think the partners have done a great job (and which will be just as enthusiastically reviewed next week). And what makes London so special now is the much wider accessibility to non-European styles of cooking."

"As to what could be better still would be a realisation by restaurateurs that eating out in London is still expensive in comparison to other big cities; that although many restaurateurs have moved away from marking up their wines by 300 per cent, too many haven't; and that there are too many people working in restaurants without adequate English. Service is about communication and it bugs me so much when receptionists can't even get my name right for the reservation."

Mills can set London in context because when not eating out here she is selflessly travelling. "I go to New York two or three times a year and to Paris once a month. I have a specific itinerary. Train over, lunch at a two or three star Michelin restaurant, a visit to a gallery, a glass of champagne and the last train home. And, invariably, I do this on my own."

It is this insatiable appetite for eating out which, while the key to her professional renown, is also the cause of her main personal concern, her weight. "This is a struggle I just don't think I will ever win. My new year's resolution last year was not to eat bread but that didn't last long so this year I hired a personal trainer to allow me to carry on in my current style without doing serious damage but when he looked at my food diary for a week he thought it was for my whole family!" And with that she emphatically told the waiter that, yes, she would like to see the dessert menu.