

Galvin in the sky with diamonds

22 Jul 2006 by JR

A reader recently emailed to ask where I would recommend for her and her husband to take their son for dinner to celebrate his 25th birthday. 'Fun with fabulous food' was her precise request although I assumed that, as cosmopolitan Londoners, they would also appreciate somewhere new.

My immediate response was **Galvin at Windows**, the restaurant which Chris Galvin has just opened with his financial backer Ken Sanker on the 28th floor of the Hilton on Park Lane. After four excellent meals at this restaurant I am confident that they will have a very good time but my reasons for proposing this particular restaurant go beyond this family's celebration dinner. By recommending it and writing about it I hope that I can also put enough pressure on the restaurant's management to stop a serious malpractice that still pervades too many London restaurants, the failure to close off the credit cards properly, thereby inducing any unsuspecting customer to pay the service charge twice.

Serious as this professional transgression is, it should not in itself detract either from the pleasure of eating Galvin's food, enjoying the restaurant's extraordinary views across London and the enthusiastic professionalism of the staff where even I could not help noticing that the receptionists were wearing matching dresses, shoes and necklaces.

The downside of these wonderful views is that you have to go through 28 floors of the hotel to see them. London's most central Hilton was built in the 1970s, long before the current prerequisite for a successful hotel restaurant was that it must have a separate entrance at street level. Although the hotel has made continuous upgrades to its interior, the only access to the restaurant remains via its inevitably chilling hotel lobby and then the main lifts which service all the bedrooms. Walking in for a business lunch behind a large group, or going up with my wife for an all too rare dinner a *deux*, in a lift that seemed to stop at every floor were not the ideal preamble to a smart meal.

But the views that await are staggering enough to impress any keen traveller or Londoner momentarily tired of life. One view from the bar allows vistas across to the City and way beyond to the east while one side of the restaurant allows such clear views into the gardens of Buckingham Palace that it comes as no surprise to recall that its occupants were not best pleased when the hotel was granted planning permission. Views from the other two sides are equally impressive if less regal, but above all else what distinguishes the entire eating area is the presence of so much natural light, well into the night at this time of the year.

It is the presence of this natural stimulant, sadly all too rare in our crowded capital, that seems to energise the staff and has so conspicuously inspired Chris Galvin. Despite the physical and mental challenge of opening his own restaurant for the first time only last autumn – Galvin in Baker Street, a 'bistrot de luxe' with his brother Jeff – Chris told me that he felt he could not pass up the opportunity to transform this restaurant which has never really managed to realise its full potential.

Such a stage has allowed Galvin to move away from the simpler, more robust flavours that dominated his cooking alongside his brother and while he was Executive Chef at The Wolseley to the more precise techniques using more expensive ingredients that distinguished his style at Orrery. Having said that, I have enjoyed dishes such as an escabeche of mackerel, slow cooked pork cheek, a troncon of plaice with Jersey royals and poached apricots with a *maris de bois* (a French strawberry) jelly, all of which have figured on the good-value £28 prix fixe lunch menu.

But it is the obvious licence to roam the full extent of his culinary repertoire that distinguishes what Galvin, his Head Chef Andre Garrett and his obviously talented pastry chef Chris Warwick, are cooking here. A bisque of native lobster with vegetables and cognac was lusciously rich as was a vast piece of seared foie gras with salsify and a Sauternes jus although a well-constructed and seasoned salad of garden vegetables, pea shoots and herbs was a fresh counterpoint. Large slices of monkfish ranged lengthwise across a shrimp, mussel and saffron paella while the succulent meat from a large hunk of veal sweetbreads nestled snugly, but not for too long, next to some finely prepared asparagus, morels and pommes mousselines. There is an obvious confidence in what the kitchen is doing, choosing some of the best ingredients such as turbot, Dorset lobster and Anjou pigeon, not being afraid to cook them to their precise limit to extract their maximum flavours but then presenting them sensitively and, above all, relatively simply.

That Galvin has ended up at this restaurant in the sky is, however, more or less by accident. When 18 months ago Sanker first heard that Hilton were renovating the space he approached them with another chef in mind but was rebuffed. The hotel then continued with its £1.7 million redevelopment by United Designers, impressive other than for the seats of the chairs that are not firm enough, while negotiating with another chef. These negotiations broke down, however, with the proposed opening only a couple of months away. Hilton's newly appointed European Food & Beverage Director, Donald Morrison, suggested Galvin and a deal was struck with Sanker – although the contract was not actually signed when the restaurant opened. When I asked Sanker whether the hotel had secured its initial asking price of a minimum guaranteed rent of a million pounds a year which had put off a competitor who had wanted to bring over a top Parisian chef, he replied diplomatically that "what I am happy with is that I have managed to turn the business into what is in effect a joint venture, one that in time I think we will both benefit from as the business develops."

It may be that it is the nature of this arrangement which has allowed this unprofessional and unfriendly practice of not closing off the credit cards to persist but that is no excuse – there are enough experienced people involved in running this restaurant not to allow it to happen.

On my last visit in early July, for example, my lunch bill for three with three bottles of mineral water and two glasses of wine came to £129. A 12.5% service charge of £16.13 was added to make a total of £145.13. When my credit card came back the figure of £145.13 was listed as the subtotal and the figure along the total line left blank, making it very easy for any customer to believe that the service charge had not been included and add another £15-£20 on top – an amount that would have been pure profit.

The restaurant's management should stop this immediately. But if they do not, any visitor to this otherwise exciting restaurant must pay particular attention when signing their credit card slip

Galvin at Windows, 22 Park Lane, London W1. 020-7208 4021.
A la carte £50-55 for three courses excluding wine and service.
Closed Sunday.