

## Nicholas Lander finds two new expensive restaurants, George and Neat, sadly disappointing

24 Jun 2001 by JR

Leopards are not supposed to change their spots, so is it fair to suppose that restaurateurs or chefs, equally thick-skinned, are likely to do so?

In view of changing customer demands, the growing number of restaurants across London and the fact that conspicuous consumption seems to be moving aside in favour of simpler pleasure, it would have been reasonable to assume that the vastly experienced Mark Birley, creator of Annabel's, Mark's Club and Harry's Bar, would have made his new club, George, more in keeping with how we want to eat in 2001. Or that Richard Neat, fresh from his triumphs in Cannes where he has earned a Michelin star, could have appreciated that London has changed substantially since he last cooked here almost a decade ago. Sadly, you would be wrong on both cases.

I have to admit that any review of George appears, as the financial ads put it, as a matter of record only because it is a private club with membership by invitation and thereafter by paying an annual fee of £300. If the following saves you some money I will be delighted. Because, sadly, it is not worth it.

That was not, however, how I felt standing on the doorstep on the way there waiting for a taxi that was 15 minutes late. I am a great fan of Birley's, particularly of Harry's Bar where the chef, Alberico Penati, is one of the best Italian chefs anywhere (and the most difficult to understand) and of Mark's Club, where the matronly service and quintessential English food sets standards for The Connaught to follow.

But most of all I admire Birley's eye, his ability to design the layout of a restaurant, to fill the walls with wonderful pictures and to make you feel extremely relaxed - until of course you get the bill, where again he sets standards! At a meal in Harry's Bar three months ago I asked the waiter why certain dishes were in red ink and the others in black on a cream coloured menu. The answer was simple - to make the menu look better and easier to read - and in both cases the obvious was simply and sympathetically achieved.

Walking into George I felt for some time that the Old Master had pulled it off again. There is a definite air of Harry's Bar to the room with tables very close together (the four tables in our alcove sat 17, for example) and the walls covered in evocative, colourful prints, many by David Hockney whose Parade drawing also graces the dessert menu. Most innovative is the pale, Cape Cod duckboarding which covers the top half of the restaurant. There is an open kitchen, a *rôtisserie* for roasting chickens and legs of lamb, and down a flight of incongruous tartan steps, a bar, a cool private dining room and, even more incongruously, a TV showing Sky Sports.

Also as in Harry's Bar, the food is served on rather small sized plates and although our first courses were pretty good, that was the highest compliment anyone round the table could pay. These included a tower of smoked eel, horseradish and baked potato with *crème fraîche*, a caesar salad, queen scallops and a *tarte fine* of cheese and endive. Our main courses were a veal chop with wild mushrooms that again was fine if not memorable and two fish dishes, grilled baby turbot and tuna, which somewhat unprofessionally came with precisely the same accompaniment of a ragout of spring vegetables and star anise. The *pommes allumettes* were really poor.

Desserts included an icecream of excellent consistency but whose toffee flavour we all had trouble discerning and a summer pudding that really should never have been allowed to leave the kitchen with far too much bread, barely any fruit and certainly a distinct lack of the essential white and blackcurrants. And just Smarties with the coffee? Surely at £50 a head plus membership today's Londoners deserve better?

George is aiming at a lower age group than Birley's other clubs by being for example the only one not to insist that men wear ties. But the air is still full of South Audley Street warbler-type cries such as 'Order me a Bellini, darling, won't you?' More importantly, the kitchen fails to convince. As our hostess, a professional chef and long-time Birley fan, admitted afterwards, 'I am sad - it wasn't at all what I was expecting.'

Dinner at Richard Neat's new restaurant on the second floor of the Oxo tower (six floors below the Oxo restaurant and brasserie run by Harvey Nichols) just scrapes under the £50 barrier by offering a three-course menu at £49 per person. With the sun shining in through the windows, across the river and on St Paul's Cathedral the attractions are obvious but to get anywhere near value for the money all these various elements have to gel. And even on a glorious summer's evening by the time the final bill for £305.89 for dinner for four including two bottles of wine at £30 each came along I felt that this one meal had satisfied any urge to eat Neat's food for many months to come.

Neat rose to prominence at Pied à Terre in Charlotte Street in the early 1990s when chefs believed everything laudable that was written about them and blithely ignored any criticism. I recall all too well Neat's arrogance in those days when over lunch there a friend asked for his lamb to be well cooked. The waiter, almost quaking in his boots, said that this would not be possible but when we insisted he went off to take the unpalatable news to the kitchen. When the lamb did arrive it was of course as pink as Neat wanted to serve it rather than as my friend had asked for it to be cooked.

Neat has returned to London, leaving his Cannes restaurant in his *sous chefs* hands Monday-Friday, with this attitude reinforced. The first thing I had to do when we sat down was to remove the designer vase with its single designer flower from the table because neither Neat nor any of his management have taken the trouble to sit at the tables and realise that because of their combined height you cannot see the people across the table.

Equally ridiculous are Neat's comments that he will have no trouble filling these 350 seats because the South Bank is now the place to be and millions are trooping into Tate Modern nearby. Unfortunately for him and his backers these crowds are not walking out of the Tate and looking to spend £17 a head (for two courses in his brasserie) or £49 in his restaurant. Most of those are instead, quite understandably, falling into branches of EAT or any of the pizza restaurants on Gabriel's Wharf and that's if Neat can woo those really interested in food and wine away from Oxo.

And you have to be really interested in food to be seduced by Neat's very masculine menu with no concessions made to the many women who now dine out and pick up the bill or those over the summer who may want something light and fresh, like a salad or chilled soup. Instead gird your loins for starters such as snails with garlic purée and asparagus; sea scallops with black pudding, scrambled egg and caramelised apple (a dish that was really an assault on the senses) or rilette of red mullet, prune purée and almond cream, described as a 'strange dish' by one adventurous eater.

The same richness continues into the main courses - sole with a truffled potato purée, veal sweetbreads wrapped in Parma ham (why?) with wild mushroom polenta - and dessert. Although one of these included a very spectacular towering interpretation of *oeufs à la neige* they were preceded by an unannounced pistachio *crème brûlée* that was so luscious that it left us not wanting to bother with dessert. If the price includes an *avant-dessert* then surely it should offer some refreshing contrast to what is to follow?

There have been some laudatory write-ups for Neat but these have tended to emanate from writers who have been recognised and treated accordingly. I went anonymously and paid myself. And this is the crucial test - of the ten or so I have spoken to who have gone to Neat and paid their way, whether in the restaurant or brasserie, not one has been impressed or plans to return.

**George, 87/88 Mount Street, London W1, 020 7491 4433**  
**Neat, 2nd Floor, Oxo Tower, Bargeh**