From improvement to 'beyond vulgar' in London hotel dining rooms

10 Feb 2006 by JR

Hotels have increasingly become recognisable by the restaurants they keep. Restaurants may be only one part of any hotel's attractions but they are more widely available than any spa, however pampering; any plasma screen however large; and any bed, however comfortable, despite the fact that bed and breakfast are still any hotel's raison d'etre.

But just as important as the charm of the hotel restaurant is in my opinion the spirit, intelligence and sensitivity with which the hotel's management chooses the kind of restaurant it will house. A hotel's restaurant lies at the heart of the hospitality package it offers and while it may be practical for certain services to be out-sourced, such as security, IT or laundry, out-sourcing the restaurant is only a step away from out-sourcing the bedrooms.

Having said that, I have enjoyed meals at Nobu in the Metropolitan Hotel, London, and Kittichai in the Thompson Hotel in New York which operate independently of the hotel ownership as much as I have in London's Capital Hotel or Paris's Le Cinq, where they are under the same ownership. In each of these there is a distinct synergy between the hotel's approach and the menu's appeal.

Over the past few months several London hotels have either opened or re-opened their restaurants with varying degrees of success and in each case it seems to be the philosophy behind the process that has been the determining factor in their ultimate appeal. No amount of money or talented chefs can salvage an ill-conceived enterprise.

The re-design of the family owned **Goring Hotel** is a good example of a distinct improvement on a well-oiled machine. The hotel already boasts a separate entrance to its restaurant, a pre-requisite for success, but someone in The Goring's senior management deserves a huge compliment for thinking of asking David Linley, the furniture designer, to bring a new look to the formerly dark interior.

Today, the room is much, much brighter; the chairs, not surprisingly, hugely comfortable while the hanging lights add a touch of fun, an element definitely missing from the room before. Just as sensibly, the hotel's management has done nothing to significantly change the menu which is still firmly rooted in seasonal British produce; its equally reasonable pricing structure; its well-priced classic wine list; and, perhaps most distinctively, its hugely informative British and Irish cheese list, all of which remain as enticing as ever. The only downside on both occasions that I have eaten at The Goring recently has been the impact which the 30% increase in turnover due to the re-design has had on service, which, while as friendly as ever, seems to have lost its sharpness.

Whether the directors of **The Dorchester** Hotel Group took themselves to The Goring before they embarked on a major investment which has resulted in the most awful re-design of The Grill and the vastly over-priced China Tang in the basement will remain a mystery. But the brief taxi ride would have saved them a lot of money and their customers from some very sore eyes.

Described by even Michael Winner as 'beyond vulgar' and by one of their staff, whom I recognised from his former restaurant, as 'a cross between Moulin Rouge and the Mull of Kintyre', the Grill has no saving aesthetic grace whatsoever. And, sadly, not even the chef Ollie Couillaud, formerly at La Trompette, can conjure anything from his basement to compensate as the ground floor kitchen, which Anton Mosimann insisted was installed right by the restaurant, was taken away some years ago and not re-instated in this re-design. As a result, Couillaud's more adventurous dishes make their way up from the basement by escalator and arrive less hot than they should, even his take on a sticky toffee pudding which, at £12.50 including service, must rank as one of the world's most expensive.

Leasing out the basement restaurant to David Tang, who has made his name as a restaurateur and retailer in Hong Kong

and Shanghai, must have been an appealing idea on paper - such is his stature, the current attraction of dim sum and the potential to build on the hotel's former Oriental restaurant's reputation. But leasing a hotel's space to another means not only losing control of that space but also how it cares for its customers. Would any hotelier condone the behaviour of China Tang's waiting staff who, to ensure that one reader left his table by 22.30 as they had stipulated, brought them their coats and the bill at 22.15 without them being requested?

These errors of judgement are, however, compounded by a much larger question: why are the hotel restaurants in London owned by The Dorchester Group nowhere near the equivalent of those they run in Paris? There Alain Ducasse is in charge of the kitchens at the Plaza Athénée and the highly talented Yannick Alleno at Le Meurice. As a result, these restaurants are among the most exciting in the capital. This certainly cannot be said of The Dorchester and London's visitors and residents deserve much better.

The Victorian **Brown's Hotel** in Mayfair, recently renovated by Sir Rocco Forte's company, and the brand new Apex Hotel in the City may seem initially to have little in common but, despite the obvious investment, both new restaurants share common faults: an awkwardly shaped dining room and a failure, on the management's part, to put themselves in the customer's place.

The Grill at Brown's has conspicuously set its hat at the classic dining style sadly vacated by the re-designs at The Connaught, The Savoy and now The Dorchester, and to a considerable extent it succeeds. The comprehensive menu ensures that the kitchen gets an opportunity to show just what it can do with a couple of dishes of the day on the lunchtime menu (and we all regretted missing the steak and kidney pie and the Lancashire Hot Pot) and another at dinner alongside the a la carte dishes whose reasonable prices for Central London thoughtfully include any side dishes. Highlights of our meal included a creamy pea and bacon soup; dressed Cornish crab; astutely cooked plain farm partridge; and the re-emergence of that classic, an escalope of veal Holstein.

But the meal was let down by an unappetising dessert menu, less than smooth service despite the presence of the ever-smiling Angelo Maresca, formerly at The Savoy Grill, and above all by a room that simply failed to deliver any sense of occasion or fun. The broad, panelled room may exude a sense of a bygone era but in its current layout it reminded me more of a gentleman's club than a restaurant that will appeal to the local, well-heeled but also well-cared-for market. Smaller could have been much more beautiful.

Close to Fenchurch Street, the management of the Apex Hotel have astutely appointed Tom Ilic as executive chef to their bizarrely named **Addendum** restaurant and brasserie (do we need reminding of the bill before we even sit down?). Ilic's approach is for strong, clean flavours in such dishes as calf's sweetbreads with cock kidneys, girolles and almonds and John Dory and langoustines in a shellfish nage, but in a modern, windowless room this approach can be somewhat overpowering. My main course of diver scallops with pork belly came with neither vegetables nor salad, either of which would have added far more enjoyment to the dish than the vast plate of excessively intricate petits fours that came with the coffee.

One factor that holds back hotel restaurants still seems to be, sadly, decision making by committee.

The Goring SW1, 020-7396 3000

The Dorchester W1, 020-7629 8888

Brown's W1, 020-7493 6020

Addendum EC3, 020-7977 9500.