London finally comes of age as a restaurant city

23 Nov 2004 by JR

London, many contend, has become the restaurant capital of the world. This is not a claim, however unscientific, I have ever adhered to although I am firmly convinced that the rate of improvement in the capital and the country's restaurants has been faster and more marked than in any other country over the past decade.

But the almost simultaneous opening of two restaurants within the next fortnight, East@West behind Cambridge Circus and The Wolseley close to The Ritz on Piccadilly, mark a coming of age for our restaurant industry albeit for very different reasons.

East@West's opening is significant because it has attracted, in Christine Manfield, one of the world's most exciting chefs. And not just on a commuting consultancy basis, part of yet another blank cheque signing by the director of an hotel group, but the considered decision on Manfield's part to leave her native Australia after the huge success of her Paramount restaurant in Sydney and to settle here rather than in New York (she describes herself as a 'serious urban chick').

The Wolseley, by contrast is a coming together as much as a coming of age of top British hospitality management. It is owned by CLK Restaurants Ltd, a moniker which stands for Chris Corbin and Jeremy King, formerly behind Le Caprice, The Ivy and J Sheekey and David Loewi, formerly MD of Conran Restaurants who has brought along Chris Galvin from Orrery restaurant as Executive Chef. These four together have amassed close on 100 years of restaurant experience under their rather slim waists.

Technically, neither are new restaurants. The Wolseley was the uninspiring China House (although built in the 1920s as a Wolseley car show room) whilst East@West takes over from West Street which never got off to a good start thanks to unsympathetic architects and an opening date of 11 September 2001.

Manfield is an extraordinarily strong individual who spent seven years as a hairdresser and another seven as a teacher before starting to cook in 1986 but has no doubt that she has found the ideal profession. 'This is not a job, food consumes your life', she states with a smile.

I first saw her extolling this principle and explaining some of her ingredients and dishes to a room full of her new kitchen brigade and waiting staff surrounded by stacks of unopened boxes stamped Made in Vietnam in the week before the restaurant was due to open. Manfield was certainly not going to let the theft of her laptop just after she arrived, with all her recipes, layouts and plans, stand in her way. It was an impassioned performance greeted by a spontaneous round of applause from those who may see her stricter side once the restaurant opens.

Over a dimsum lunch, where judging by the quantity she ordered no-one will leave her restaurant hungry, she continued in the same vein. 'I think of my food as modern east Asian with the strongest influences coming from Japan, Vietnam and China, the mother cuisine to them all. And my imperative within our bar and restaurant menus is to break away from the traditional psychology of an à la carte set-up to allow my food to be as accessible as possible, to empower the customer to choose what they want to eat and how.'

'This is perhaps the essential and unresolved dilemma of being a chef. I am the first to admit I am a control freak but I have to be. I have to organise my brigade to ensure that we all give off our best twice a day when the curtain goes up and customers walk in. But I cannot force them to like my food. What I have learnt though from travelling around Asia and working alongside some of the world's greatest chefs is that past the recipe stage our work becomes almost architectural. I work to put as many different, complementary and elaborate flavours into a dish but then, however complicated this may sound, the actual structure on the plate has to be simple. Otherwise, and in spite of how powerful I am inside the kitchen, no one will touch them.'

To make sure that this happens Manfield is here with her long-time partner and restaurant manager, Margie Harris, and two chefs who have worked with her in Australia. The ground floor menu will serve what she describes as 'superior dimsum and dishes to share' with the former pizza oven reconfigured to prepare food cooked in Asian iron pots with her more elaborate tasting menus upstairs. The major question remains, however, whether dishes such as her black pepper

chicken tea, watercress and enoki mushrooms or sweet grilled eel, steamed pork, chilli squid and black ink noodles will be popular enough to make East@West a financial success.

What exactly The Wolseley will serve remains, by contrast, heavily under wraps - entirely in keeping with the manner in which Corbin and King have run their restaurants so successfully in the past. There are no press releases, no website, just a brief sign on the window which describes The Wolseley as bar, café and restaurant without giving anything more away. Although Loewi did allow his guard to drop for one second to acknowledge that something comparable would be New York's Balthazar, a place where anybody can drop in at any time to eat, drink, meet or hope to be seen.

And when The Wolseley does finally open its doors mid-November as a restaurant of its time in a lovingly restored building of great charm and presence it will, I believe, stand for far more than just another restaurant. It will be the first time that as a city we have produced top-class restaurateurs who after their first 20 years of success are still young enough to be able to go back into the business rather than walk away and retire.

This is a situation which Corbin acknowledged over a coffee earlier in the year whilst modestly failing to appreciate its significance. When I asked him why having been so successful, sold out at the right time and survived leukaemia he was opening another restaurant he replied with his habitual smile, 'Because it is in the blood.'

Now that Londoners have restaurants in their blood, as the French and Italians have had for decades, the best surely is yet to come.

East@West, 15 West Street, London W1 (tel 020 7010 8600)
The Wolseley, 160 Piccadilly, London W1 (tel 020 7499 6996)