

London's most significant restaurant openings late 2006

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A sequence of restaurant openings across London's West End may finally lay to rest one of the industry's long standing maxims, that 'location, location, location' is the vital key to success.

The process began with Anthony Demtre and Will Smith opening Arbutus in Frith Street, Soho, where respected restaurateur Claudio Pulze had failed twice. Despite an awkward interior and with a steep set of stairs to the kitchen dividing the room in two, Arbutus is playing to packed houses thanks to great-value, strong flavoured cooking and a cracking wine list.

As though to prove it is nothing personal, Pulze added to his numerous other successful restaurants by taking over the site at 23 Conduit Street where Deca and a second branch of Rowley's, a long established steak house on Jermyn Street, had closed, and opening Via Condotti. Following similar principles – Via Condotti boasts an engaging restaurant manager in Richard Martinez, a talented chef in Pasquale Amico and keen prices for its two, three and four course menus – this restaurant is also now extremely, and justifiably, busy.

Since then another four restaurants have opened, or should I say re-opened, as they are all rising phoenix-like from the ashes of restaurants which have closed.

The first was L'Atelier de Joel Robuchon which opened impressively in September and where standards, other than on the reservation line, only seem to have improved. But the attraction of this particular site for its chefs and investors, despite its lack of success initially as West Street and then East@West, lay in the infrastructure they could inherit. One particular but invariably unnoticed asset is the large 'prep' kitchen in the basement which provides all the raw material for the open kitchens on the ground and first floors.

While overseeing The Wolseley on Piccadilly, Chris Corbin and Jeremy King found time to spot the potential of the corner site of Regent Street and Carlton Street when the partners who had sunk such a lot of money into Pomodorino decided to cut their losses and head back to Rome. And in St Alban they have created a very exciting space.

Its combination of 1960's retro and slightly futuristic feel, which reminded me strongly of the Lever House restaurant on New York's Park Avenue, may divide opinion but what is remarkable is how collectively they have created a space in which there seem to be no 'bad tables', those by the kitchen or lavatories which no-one really wants to occupy. Here, however, by a combination of clever design, the use of low but comfortable chairs, rounded banquettes and vast experience, they have created a room where these do not exist. One consequence of this design is that the room is relatively quiet and very open - not the spot, I would suggest, for any secret assignation.

With the paint barely dry when I ate there it is too early to pass judgement on the potential of its predominantly Mediterranean menu but here and at the even more recently opened Scott's in Mayfair, the omens are promising.

For those with fond memories of Scott's of old, this expensive redesign and refurbishment by Caprice Holdings (rumoured to have cost over £4 million) will come as a very pleasant surprise. The front half is an extremely elegant shellfish bar, complete with fish scale motif on the floor, which will sensibly stay open throughout the afternoon with a view, presumably, to lure in any shoppers in the vicinity or the numerous venture capitalists and merchant bankers who work nearby. The dining room exudes both comfort and, as is so often the case in long established restaurants, a sense of appropriateness, that this is a place to sit down and enjoy good food, wine and company.

These sentiments are enhanced by a menu written by the company's executive chefs, Mark Hix and Tim Hughes, which not only combines classic fish dishes (with, Hughes was keen to stress, a reliance on sustainable sources) with some very distinctive British food such as Arbroath smokies, stargazy pie and for the very hungry, a Sussex Pond Pudding to share as dessert. Despite the investment, prices seem reasonable, particularly on the wine list (where, exemplarily, at the middle and top end, a cash margin, rather than a per centage multiple, has been added). My only major reservation was why such a professional restaurant company should be applying a £2 cover charge in the dining room, an antediluvian approach which no other retailer follows today.

Theo Randall at The InterContinental at Hyde Park Corner is located in the same space as Le Soufflé of old and suffers from the same physical faults, a lack of a separate entrance and its location in a room with no natural light, challenges which the brown leather interior only seem to exacerbate.

More fundamentally, having lured Randall away from the esteemed River Café where he had been head chef and a partner, the hotel's management has not had the courage of its convictions to allow Randall to find his own culinary direction. The food is good but the whole experience is so derivative of his former restaurant as to be disconcerting. And the menu prices, with the main courses mostly around the £25 mark, also exude an air of déjà vu. These, however, cannot have been helped by the ridiculous, and I can only assume expensive, couriering of a wooden box, half a metre long, containing a small olive tree and bottle of olive oil to each of the city's restaurant writers.

The diversity of these six new restaurants is an obvious attraction for the city's restaurant-goers, as is the initial confidence of the service I encountered other than at The InterContinental, often something that lags behind the kitchen. That most are open for lunch and dinner seven days a week (Via Condotti is closed on Sunday and Randall on Sunday evenings) is also a definite plus. But, most significantly, is the fact that during 2007 they will surely only get better.

Arbutus, 63-4 Frith Street, W1, 020-7734 4545,

Via Condotti, 23 Conduit Street, 020-7493 7050,

L'Atelier de Joel Robuchon, 13/15 West Street, WC2, 020-7010 8600,

St Alban, 4-12 Regent Street, SW1, 020-7499 8558

Scott's, 20 Mount Street, W1, 020-7495 7309,

Theo Randall at The InterContinental, One Hamilton Place, W1, 020-7409 3131.