The Harts revamp Quo Vadis

17 Jun 2008 by Nick Lander/FT

Eddie Hart, who, with his elder brother Sam, has over the past five years opened the highly successful Fino, Barrafina and most recently Quo Vadis restaurants all close to one another in Fitzrovia and Soho, leaned forward in his chair and said earnestly, “The last thing we want is for Quo Vadis to be known as the latest Hart brothers’ opening. This restaurant has been here since 1926 and we feel we are no more than its custodians, who have restored it to its former elegance. It’s not about us.”

The inherent modesty in this approach may seem unusual in a profession seemingly dominated by loudmouths but it certainly fits with the very British style these two brothers cultivate. Sam, the taller of the two, always looks dapper whether he is greeting customers or opening a bottle of wine, as does Eddie, although his suit is invariably enhanced by brightly coloured braces and on the day we met a red and white handkerchief in his jacket pocket and a red watch strap.

Their gentlemanly attire owes much to their upbringing as sons of Tim and Stefa Hart, who own Hambleton Hall in Rutland, which has been at the forefront of the British country house hotel movement since 1979. But living so close to the hospitality industry initially had a very different impact.

“It put me off going into the business for some time,” Sam explained. “When I was young I wanted to make money and I could see at first hand that this profession does not reward the long hours it demands. I joined a money broking firm and was sent off to Mexico City. A few months later, completely under-qualified, I opened a night club with a friend which somehow proved very successful. This later allowed me to travel in Spain and to look for our first site when I came back to London.”

For Eddie, Hambleton could not have been more convenient. “I was an unproductive schoolboy and so Father (they still sweetly refer to their parents as Father and Mother) put me in charge of the bar for a year and I loved it. I enjoyed the challenge of keeping it immaculate or of pouring the perfect cocktail and, above all, of being congratulated on doing a job well, something that had never happened to me at school.” Eddie then worked in other parts of the business, travelled to Spain (their Mother grew up in Mallorca) and was wondering just what to do next when Sam called. If he (Sam) came back to the UK, would Eddie like to open something together.

Their initial inspiration was the iconic Cal Pep tapas bar in Barcelona but as they began their budgets they came to realise that higher London rents required more restaurant tables to generate a higher spend. Fino opened to excellent reviews for its modern Spanish food, but their timing, coinciding with the invasion of Iraq, could have been better. And although they had managed to secure a central site without any track record, they soon realised the disadvantage of a basement. “Fino is very busy but because of where it is we miss out on any passing trade, which can be perhaps an extra 10 covers a day. Multiply that by the 320 days we are open and an average spend of £50 per head and the lost business is much greater than the rent you save by being in a basement,” Sam explained.

Barrafina in Soho, with 23 seats at an L shaped bar and an open kitchen directly behind in which the Harts were often to be seen in chefs’ jackets, offered slightly simpler Spanish food and tapas and has proved so popular that it is now serving 1,000 customers a week. It prompted the Harts to consider finding sites for other Barrafinas but as they wandered the streets of Soho they kept passing Quo Vadis, closed, neglected and run down. The usual period of nail biting negotiations were finally rewarded and £2.4 million later Quo Vadis, which comprises four former townhouses, numbers 26-29 Dean Street that are now one building but belong to three different landlords via four different leases, opened as a restaurant on the ground floor and a private members’ club upstairs.

The Harts considered continuing their Spanish theme at Quo Vadis but abandoned it, Sam said, “within fifteen seconds. Instead, what we decided was more fitting for the building was a menu that was reasonably large, flexible and populist,

using the best British ingredients wherever possible, and cooking them pretty simply. We wanted to create somewhere that would give those who live and work round here the opportunity to call in two or three times a week."

In fact, I think they have created somewhere far more exemplary than that. They have resolved the tricky question of a cover charge by imposing one but including within it their excellent bread, which they bake on the premises, a bowl of Luques olives and unlimited filtered tap water. A great deal of thought has obviously gone into the size and quality of the linen napkins and tableware, the first thing any customer touches or notices. And the wine list has been collated not only with care but also with only a relatively small cash mark-up applied to the rarer, older bottles that would in other hands be far more expensive. We drank a bottle of Chateau Trotanoy 1981 for £82, which is remarkably good-value. Anyone with euros to spend will find this list very inviting.

And in continuing their five-year working relationship with French chef Jean-Philippe Patruno, with whom they opened Fino, they have clearly laid down their vision and guidelines for dishes which he executes precisely despite a basement kitchen. Seabass carpaccio, fried whitebait with a tangy tartar sauce, veal sweetbreads, a tranche of turbot cooked on the bone with spinach were all first class at a dinner in the restaurant's first week. A subsequent lunch of brown shrimps on toast and crab tagliatelle was only marred by my guest's reluctance to share a strawberry trifle.

As important to the Harts as the quality of the food and wine they serve is ensuring that they are on hand. "We both believe that the handshake is very important, that even the most seasoned restaurant-goer likes to be recognised and to be made welcome. At it's most basic," Sam explained with a smile, "that's our role."

While two restaurants have allowed the brothers to split their duties, while this latest opening is in its infancy one will always be based at Quo Vadis while the other nips between what they refer to as 'our Spanish restaurants.' Their obvious common approach masks their different talents, which they were happy to set out in each other's presence. Sam, according to Eddie, is more numerate and can see the bigger picture while Eddie brings the technical and practical restaurant expertise and is, in Sam's view, much more of a perfectionist, an attribute which in my experience distinguishes the best restaurateurs from the rest.

Fino www.finorestaurant.com

Barrafina www.barrafina.co.uk

Quo Vadis www.quovadissoho.co.uk