

## Make the place fit the space

18 May 2011 by Nick Lander/FT

The Gilbert Scott restaurant, named after the original architect of the magnificent 1873 building that now houses the St Pancras Renaissance hotel, opened its own doors on 5 May 2011.

Several days later, Eleven Madison Park in New York won the coveted 'Outstanding Restaurant in the US Award' at the important annual James Beard ceremony held in New York.

Both restaurants share several common features. Each occupies magnificent spaces with high ceilings and plenty of natural light. Both buildings exude civic pride and a sense of history. And, on a more mundane level, both share the same phrase, 'restrooms', as Marriott, who run this hotel, have decided to bring this word with them across the Atlantic rather than use the British equivalent.

But the recent history of Eleven Madison Park could suggest some very specific lessons for Marriott's management and for Marcus Wareing, the British chef they have brought in to run the Gilbert Scott restaurant. That is, if they want to create somewhere special, the equivalent of the building it is located in, rather than creating just another humdrum, overpriced brasserie - which my meals there indicate that it is.

Eleven Madison Park initially opened as a more casual brasserie and struggled. The owners realised change was necessary and brought in Daniel Humm, a Swiss chef then cooking in San Francisco, and promoted William Guidara from another of their restaurants to be its new general manager.

They reduced the number of covers from 114 to 80 to ensure better service; settled on a fair, fixed-price menu at lunch and dinner (of US\$56 and US\$125 for three and four courses respectively); and, most courageously, reduced their à la carte menu to 16 words in total. These comprise the main ingredient of the four choices at each course, the precise preparation of which is then explained by the waiter, adding a sense of theatre to a sense of place that is subsequently enhanced by excellent food.

The Gilbert Scott badly suffers from a lack of such a clear sense of ownership and direction, a state of affairs that is obvious even from looking at its website. Under the heading 'Restaurant', it refers to the Gilbert Scott as 'a modern British brasserie' although there is a significant gulf between 'British' and 'brasserie'. Which one does it want to be?

The answer I came to is that it would like to be a brasserie but to charge restaurant prices. The choice of Wareing, who has always been involved in restaurants, including his own in the Berkeley hotel, Knightsbridge, coupled with designer David Collins, who was responsible for The Wolseley's layout, reinforces this unhappy compromise.

The restaurant follows the curve of the building but too many tables have been squeezed in across its width for comfort (the tables round the outer walls are far more spacious). The tables for two, in particular, are quite narrow (a trademark Collins feature), which means that sideplates for the (good) bread are dispensed with, a situation that in turn led to complaints from the two ladies lunching on either side of us. The absence of salt and pepper sets from the tables is inexplicable and inexcusable.

Small matters such as this would and could be forgiven if the menu and the food were memorable, but sadly neither is. The menu is, by turns, difficult to read, overlong and twee, while the food is inexorably British and unnecessarily heavy.

Presented on one large card, Wareing's menu harks back to a decade ago when British chefs felt they had to make up for their own lack of confidence and their customers lack of comfort with our excellent indigenous ingredients by spelling out all their sources and suppliers. This is simply not necessary today but this menu is littered with the names of several different counties (Yorkshire, Dorset, Cornish); just as many cities (Harrogate, London Pride and Manchester); and each dish is accompanied by several words of description, which does not allow any role other than that of plate carriers for the otherwise enthusiastic waiting staff. It's all very heavy going.

The only attempt at humour is the heading on the list of vegetables described by the phrase 'vegetable patch' but this again only underlines his and the hotel's confused and antediluvian approach. While he may be in charge of the kitchens,

no one seems to have played the role of editor to all that is being offered. There are 14 first courses, 15 mains, 8 vegetables and 7 different accompaniments (from chips to pease pudding and oversalted colcannon); this not only makes the decision making awkward and time consuming but also allows the eventual bill to mount up.

And any claims for this to be a 'modern brasserie' must be heavily discounted by two other facts. The Gilbert Scott has opened without a set-price lunch menu (although it has an early-supper menu) and slaps on a £2 cover charge. Surely someone at Marriott could and should have appreciated that such a charge today is really an insult?

Two starters, an attractively fresh English garden salad and a nettle and watercress soup, and a charming Irish waitress were what I will remember from my visits. But the strongest impression of The Gilbert Scott I have taken away are of just what it could have been: with courage and conviction it could be a great restaurant in a great setting.

London has no shortage of the former but most, because of the city's recent history, are in less than illustrious settings. Le Gavroche is in a basement; The Square in a modern building; The Greenhouse at the base of a block of flats; others in less magnificent hotel settings than here.

The Gilbert Scott is, sadly, a wasted opportunity. A trip to New York for the senior management, with the phrase 'less is more' impressed upon them, could change all that. Not too expensively and for everyone's benefit.

**Eleven Madison Park**, [www.elevenmadisonpark.com](http://www.elevenmadisonpark.com)

**The Gilbert Scott**, [www.thegilbertscott.co.uk](http://www.thegilbertscott.co.uk)