

New money, new blood in London

28 Oct 2011 by Nick Lander/FT

With the unveiling of 700 seats in four new restaurants across central London this autumn, restaurateurs at least seem to be doing their utmost to address the alarming rise in the capital's unemployment.

The precise number of jobs that the renovated Arts Club on Dover Street, Novikov Mayfair, no more than 500 metres away on Albemarle Street, Scott's Grill by Grosvenor Square and The Delaunay on Aldwych will collectively create by the time they are all open at the end of November is difficult to calculate precisely but it will certainly not be fewer than 400. And, in addition, these restaurants will be vying for the crucial pre-Christmas trade with the emerging The Balcon on Pall Mall, chef Joel Antunes's return to Mayfair at The Embassy Club and the third Hawksmoor steakhouse in the City of London.

The first four high-profile restaurants mentioned above also represent a considerable investment, probably close to £30 million collectively, as well as a not insignificant display of ego on the part of their owners Arjun Waney, Arkady Novikov, Richard Caring and the experienced duo Chris Corbin and Jeremy King respectively.

But for those who prefer their restaurants on a more modest scale, here are three new openings that, I believe, are particularly worthy of attention.

The 10 Cases in Endell Street, Covent Garden, and Duck Soup, Dean Street, Soho, represent significantly lower investments, £500,000 and £300,000 respectively, on the part of their younger owners. And in both instances half of that has been spent on simply securing the premium to take over what were rather tired Italian restaurants from their previous owners.

The 10 Cases is the culmination of a dream Ian Campbell and Will Palmer, both 30, first had while sharing digs at university. Their stated ambition to run a friendly, bistrot à vins is obvious even from the outside: four tables on the pavement; large glass folding-doors; a simple interior that comprises 10 tables plus eight stools round the bar (there is also a small private dining room in the basement); and, most appetisingly, eight blackboards hanging from the walls.

These convey the bar snacks and menu, which falls into two categories. Three dishes that never change: a house salad, a whole lemon sole, and a fillet of beef with foie gras. From the other blackboards, we enjoyed snails on toast, a fillet of stone bass, a Barnsley lamb chop and absolutely correct versions of crème caramel and a pear and almond tart. Dinner for four without wine was £100.

But it is the wine that gives this place its sparkle, as well as Annabel, the friendliest and most efficient waitress I have encountered this year. Their policy is to buy no more than 10 cases of any wine - to maintain customer interest and to make their suppliers work harder, Palmer explained - and to concentrate on wines that they can sell at between £18 and £40. The principle of including vegetables and potatoes in the price of the main courses is also highly commendable.

Duck Soup, which takes its name from the Marx Brothers film, is a partnership between Julian Biggs, Rory McCoy and Clare Lattin (pictured above, left to right), whose mortgage secured the site and whose credit card financed the basic furniture and refurbishments.

These are minimal in a slip of a building with a long bar and a few tables along the ground floor and basement which seat 26 each. Its idiosyncratic design includes a very old record player and a stack of vinyl by the front door; the drinks and wine lists written in black on the white walls, including something called a Little Ron, a third of a pint; and the handwritten menus, which invariably include several spelling mistakes. The shelves behind the bar include full bottles, the ones opposite are all empties, and every wine on the list is available by the glass.

Biggs' The Chef, as opposed to the train robber, as he described himself, seems to be reveling in the challenge of recreating dishes he has enjoyed on his travels. Mackerel roe on toast from Scotland; a fritto misto from Venice; simply grilled lamb cutlets with lemon and salt as eaten in Spain; and quail with pomegranate, rosewater and tahini yoghurt from further east. All served by McCoy wearing a foulard and plain white shirt that would not have had him looking out of place behind a bar in Paris in the 1950s.

Rohit Chugh has spent probably more than double the investment required for 10 Cases and Duck Soup combined on his initial **Roti Chai**, over two years in the planning, but it occupies a much larger site in the shadow of Selfridge's.

Roti Chai will immediately appeal to those who have already enjoyed Dishoom in St Martin's Lane with its humorous and nostalgic twist on the subcontinent's street food. Chugh aims to emulate this with simple, inexpensive dishes that are resonant of the food served on Indian trains in an era when he himself was growing up in England but eating Indian food cooked by his mother. This is an experience that, his cooks are now telling him, has left him far more demanding than many professional chefs they have previously worked for.

The ground-floor menu includes a railway lamb curry; idli sambar, steamed rice cakes with a vegetable and lentil stew; spiced lamb burgers; vegetable samosas; papri chat, moreish wheat crisps with chickpeas and a sweet chutney; and chicken lollipops followed by mango kulfi, a combination that seems to be a tremendous lure for Indian children in their school uniform, their mothers as well as numerous shopping bags, who call in for an early supper.

The 10 Cases, Duck Soup and Roti Chai are very different from one another. But each distinctively reinforces London's reputation as a city where the market is forcing price and value to be increasingly harmonious.

10 Cases www.10cases.co.uk

Duck Soup www.ducksoupsoho.co.uk

Roti Chai www.rotichai.com