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24 Feb 2018

Galvin's outpost in Constable country



A version of this article is published by the Financial Times.

As he approaches his sixtieth birthday, chef Chris Galvin had been under the impression that he could perhaps take things a little easier. For the past 40 years he has worked long hours mastering his culinary skills, initially in the kitchens of the Ritz and The Lanesborough hotels, then at Orrery and The Wolseley restaurants before, 13 years ago, joining up with his younger brother Jeff.

The geographical diversity of Galvin restaurants has not made for a quiet life. In London there has been a bistro in Baker Street, restaurants in the Hilton and Athenaeum hotels, La Chapelle by Liverpool Street, and a café in Harrods. Together with a couple of restaurants in Edinburgh and two in Dubai as well as a restaurant and pub in the village of Howe Street, Essex, they constitute a small group over which the brothers can only maintain the quality they strive for by

constant travelling.

Onto this diverse group, Chris Galvin has sought to impose strong, personal control via two distinct methods.

The first is the clarity, and apparent simplicity, of their menus. A Galvin menu, written in English, is a combination of the best of that season's ingredients cooked in the French tradition. When a French teacher at the local Felsted school in Essex asked him why he cooked in such a distinctly French manner, Chris's response was that 'when I started in hotels in London in the 1980s, that was the only style of cooking that was then being taught'.



The second is the importance of a robust infrastructure to support not just the brothers but all the chefs and front-of-house teams. Chris felt relieved the day we met because Dan Lee had just taken over as Head Chef at the Green Man, their pub. 'He met his partner, who is from Essex, working for us and she wanted to come back here to be with her family. One day they want to open on their own place and I said that if they give me a few years I will teach them everything they need to know.'

This open approach, which Galvin exemplifies but is not alone in doing so in British hospitality, has been severely tested since the Brexit vote. Many staff have decided to leave the UK; the fall in sterling has made imports more expensive; and customers' spending has been squeezed. It was 'the perfect storm of factors' as Galvin put it, which led the brothers to [close Galvin Bistrot de Luxe](#) on Baker Street on 10 February. This closure marks the beginning of an era of consolidation for the Galvins.

It may, however, be too early to say whether it is just the beginning. The location and history of the pub they took over in Howe Street in 2016 were encouraging: it is close to Broomfield Hospital as well as a new 4,000-home redevelopment and the building is supported by a fifteenth-century set of beams. It all seemed highly attractive. But the early part of the week outside London can be very quiet, even if on Sundays they can serve over 300 customers, and this new location has forced them to learn to recruit from new sources. 'We have staff on job share, students and even two who double as house husbands – it just means that they all have to be trained well', Galvin explained.

But what this will all mean for his restaurants' opening hours remains uncertain. 'I believe that a lot of restaurateurs like us are being forced to look at their opening hours and the situation here might come, quite soon, to mirror that in France where lunch is served only from noon to 2pm and dinner from 7.30pm to 9.30pm. And that would be very sad, in my opinion.'

The final contributory factor in Galvin's more cautious approach is the growing presence, and

cost, of what he refers to as 'third parties'. By this he means the cost of using Open Table or any other online reservation system and the charges imposed by the likes of Groupon. 'Everyone today has to accept them and I, for one, embrace them and urge our staff to turn them to our advantage. But they do eat into every restaurant's bottom line.'

At the Green Man, the Galvins have invested £2.7 million to cater for the widest possible clientele - from a garden where middle-aged male cyclists in lycra are welcomed, to an upstairs dining room where food is served 'family style', to a glass-fronted restaurant with a conspicuous G logo on the glass that overlooks the River Chelmer and a scene that is pure Constable.

Here Galvin and his team can put into practice all that he has learnt. There is always a very good, keenly priced set lunch and dinner menu. There is a choice of half a dozen or a dozen Colchester rock oysters, a soup, and a refreshing first course of buffalo mozzarella with blood orange and a citrus dressing. And on the day I ate there blood oranges reappeared in a hollandaise that admirably suited a wood-roasted plaice. A cassoulet of duck is another dish I always associate with Galvin.

Classics always appear on the dessert menu, too: a baba aux rum, a tarte tatin, and a Valrhona chocolate fondant as well as the Anglo-Italian combination of a vanilla panna cotta with Yorkshire rhubarb. Despite being born in Romford, a Galvin menu always evokes a corner of France.

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