



Written by
Nick Lander
6 Oct 2018

Kerridge at the Corinthia



Nick approves of the latest installation of a team from the Hand and Flowers in a central London location.

As we walked towards Leicester Square tube, I made a point of thanking the woman who has been an integral, albeit almost silent, partner in this column since I first started writing it in 1989, for such an enjoyable evening. This, of course, is my wife [that's me - JR].

More widely known as the *FT*'s wine writer, it is she who has been instrumental in my particular approach to writing about the endlessly fascinating topic of eating out: that food, however good, tastes so much better with wine and vice versa. And, as restaurateurs seek to maximise their profits from the menu, their wine and drink lists, this symbiotic combination seems even more relevant today.

This multi-pronged approach has now been set in motion by Benjamin Hofer, the engaging Austrian food and beverage manager of the Corinthia Hotel, which, since its conversion from the Ministry of Defence seven years ago into a prestigious hotel, has been something of a sleeping giant among central London hotels. It has all the prerequisites for success: ample space for bars, separate restaurant entrances, grand interiors. It just seemed to lack an individual's magic.

Actually, that should be individuals, plural, as everyone knows that hospitality is a team effort. So, once Hofer was in position, he hired Marcis Dzelzainis, the cocktail business partner of wine man Michael Sager, to enliven their drinks offer. Dzelzainis is already at home in the Corinthia's Bassoon Bar, and Sager will shortly begin to make the wine attractions of the nearby Northall restaurant more exciting.

With a drinks policy sorted, there remained the more difficult and much larger question of the food, a conundrum compounded by the physical dimensions of the main dining room. This is vast, with high ceilings supported by eight towering columns and tall windows. It needs a large presence to fill such a space, someone capable of delivering food of a similar stature.

Enter Tom Kerridge. A chef who made his name at The Hand and Flowers, a pub in Marlow, Buckinghamshire, where he elevated the food to Michelin two-star level. But, equally importantly, Kerridge comes with a certain physical presence – he is a big man with a trademark shaven head – and via the BBC he has generated a large and enthusiastic following among a predominantly young audience.

All of this was clearly on display when we walked into the restaurant at 7.20 pm at the end of the restaurant's first week. A bar cleverly breaks up the space but the restaurant's clear sightlines make people watching very easy. There was Kerridge standing quietly by the vast Rotisol grill that occupies a whole corner of the room; behind him three younger chefs toiled away; and the plush red leather chairs and banquettes were full of happy, smiling customers.

Quickly followed by a couple of small, warm creamy cheese and onion tarts, the menu and wine list arrived promptly, revealing what this restaurant is and what it is not.

It would be too facile to see Kerridge's move into this hotel as a copy of Heston Blumenthal's move from Bray, less than 10 miles from Marlow, into *Dinner* at The Mandarin in Knightsbridge. Kerridge sensibly does not even attempt to come up with anything to match Blumenthal's 'meat fruit' first course that resonates with that hotel's name. Instead, his obvious goal is to bring the cooking, the warmth and a style of service that might be described as 'smart pub' to a central London hotel that has been badly in need of such an approach.

All of these goals he achieves convincingly, helped, it has to be said, by some outstanding bread, particularly the Irish soda bread, that makes a useful first impression. The first courses we chose were a multi-coloured slice of coronation chicken in clever terrine form, with fresh mango and celery mayonnaise, and an equally attractive fresh crab vol-au-vent with avocado, green apple and crab bisque. Perhaps it was just seeing the old-fashioned phrase vol-au-vent on a menu today that made me choose this dish, but the pastry needs some refinement. The woman at the next table had to ask for a sharp knife to cut its base, while I resorted to my fingers to eat the pastry.

The eight main courses do not at this stage include a vegetarian option, something that will also have to change in my opinion. But the pig's cheek pie was well constructed with a devilled sauce adding extra savour to the mash topped with black pudding. The glazed omelette 'lobster

thermidor', a first course ordered as a main, was extremely rich, in fact even more so than the very well made brown butter tart and a blackcurrant soufflé cleverly enlivened with ginger that we ordered as dessert. Kerridge (left) is seen below with chef Nick Beardshaw.



It was from sharply dressed sommelier Charles Beaini that we were to learn of the philosophy behind the menu and his very well constructed wine list. In response to our compliments about its approachability and range (including an English dessert wine by the glass, bottles of Indian, Greek and Turkish wines as well as a very attractive Argentine Cabernet Franc 2015 from Pol Opuesto (£50)), he commented. 'We found that at The Hand & Flowers, customers arrived often intimidated, perhaps feeling slightly uncomfortable. Our job is to use every possible means to put them at their ease as quickly as possible.'

Aims I can only applaud.

Kerridge's Bar & Grill 10 Northumberland Avenue, London WC2N 5AE; tel +44 20 7321 3244

Dinner for two including wine £175