



Written by
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London's shrinking restaurant scene



The restaurant was busy on a wet Wednesday lunchtime and it has been since it first opened its doors in September 2005. In fact, since then Chris Galvin (pictured), the older of the two chef brothers whose name the restaurant bears, reckons that Galvin Bistrot de Luxe has served close to a million customers with the kind of French bourgeois food in a state of 'affordable luxury' that has long been their talisman.

And yet on Saturday 10 February, this restaurant will close its doors forever. It joins the ranks of many others: The Beagle by Hoxton overground station; 8 Hoxton Square; numerous branches of Jamie's Italian; several branches of the wholesome fast food chain Byron; Turners at 69 in Birmingham; and there is the likelihood that in today's uncertain economic climate, many more closures will follow, most unfortunately.

But this particular closure has hit me pretty hard – perhaps because I encouraged Chris and his

brother Jeff to open their first restaurant here at the outset.

It was in **early 2005** that I received a phone call from Chris inviting me to lunch at L'Escargot, my former restaurant in Soho, at which Chris had once worked under chef Martin Lam and at which Jeff was now cooking. They wanted my advice.

The restaurant space at 66 Baker Street had become available and the brothers had the very sensible idea of joining forces. But one thing bothered them in particular. The space was vacant because in its previous incarnation – an Italian restaurant called Anda founded by **Alan Yau** – it had failed. Did I believe that it was the site that was doomed or would it, could it, work under them?

I enquired about the terms being offered, which seemed quite generous and included car parking spaces for four cars underneath I seem to remember, and said that I thought that they could make it work.

I have always enjoyed the Galvin style of cooking but, far more importantly in my opinion, was the fact that their name would be over the front door. In that era, and just as importantly, in that particular part of London that was in those days poorly served by friendly neighbourhood restaurants with good cooking and welcoming service, I believed that they would, and could, succeed.

Happily, I have been proved right, even down to the quality of the *prix fixe* lunch I enjoyed last week. At a set price of £18.50 for three courses, which must make this place the city's top lunch bargain, I began with their 'lasagne' of Dorset crab in a lobster bisque (their signature first course, supplement £8.50), followed this with a rich venison pastilla, given extra richness by a side order of pommes purée, and finished all this off with a too-sweet Paris Brest. The bill came to £34.88.

And yet one thing I discovered as I walked down to Galvin Bistrot de Luxe from Baker Street tube station is that this restaurant is no longer alone, a contributory factor to the brothers' decision to close here as I learnt from a telephone conversation with Chris. 'When we opened there was us and Royal China on Baker Street. I know that a cluster of restaurants is good for everyone and no one can survive in a vacuum, but I do believe that the situation has gone too far. Now virtually every former shop has become either a coffee bar or somewhere offering grab and go food, and this began to affect our numbers.'

This profusion of alternatives started to have a profound effect on the more formal, 'white tablecloth' restaurant where 15 chefs and kitchen porters, along with support from the Galvins, are employed plus 24 front-of-house staff. 'We saw the numbers who came in for lunch after 2pm dropping as well as those who came in for supper after 9.30pm and that had a serious effect on takings. Business began to plateau and we had to do something about it. We held quite a number of workshops and ultimately closure, very sadly, emerged as the only option.'

But what links the closure of this Bistrot de Luxe to the many other restaurant closures are two factors that, as Galvin explained, 'simply cannot be ignored today by anyone in the British hospitality industry': Brexit and the consequent fall in the value of sterling.

A lot of staff have already gone home, Galvin reported, back to France, Spain, Italy and mostly to Eastern Europe – partly because they are quite fearful for their future in the UK but also because their sterling earnings now are worth so much less. And as a result, it is incumbent on anyone in the Galvins' position to make the best use of the staff at their disposal. 'Whether it

does take 10,000 hours to train a good chef, I couldn't say', said Chris who has spent the last 40 years in numerous kitchens across the UK and abroad, 'but the best are becoming increasingly difficult to find'.

Rents and business rates have also been increasing significantly, like all the imported goods every UK restaurant relies upon such as most of its wine and even small items such as butter which has gone up from £26 a pack to £56 a pack over the past year. These are costs a restaurant simply cannot pass on, particularly at a time when British consumer's wallets are being squeezed.

The Galvins will now concentrate on their other London restaurants, their two in Edinburgh (to which the Italian manager who looked after me in Baker Street so well will move to, quite happily) and their small restaurant empire in the Middle East. At least this region is not beset by the problems of Brexit, I put to Chris, who pointed out that it too had its problems, notably an oversupply of restaurants currently.

Although other manifestations of the Galvin style of cooking are available in London – at Windows in the Hilton, at the nearby Athenaeum hotel on Piccadilly and at La Chapelle in Spitalfields, as well as at their pub in Chelmsford, Essex – I will miss the Bistrot de Luxe and not just for the personal reasons I have outlined above.

This was a restaurant I always felt comfortable in – from the glass windows that allowed me to watch the chefs at work, to the collection of old menus at the back, to the photo of a very young Chris as a chef in the company of Anton Mosimann that hangs in the gents' lavatory, to the duck press that sits proudly on one side of the restaurant – all of these will now sadly become just memories. But, taken together, they serve to reinforce one of the maxims for success in the restaurant industry – that what is inside the front door of the restaurant must match what is on the outside.

I have sadly to report that only one of the restaurants I included in my 2012 review of [Four London stalwarts](#) will still be in business in 10 days' time. *O tempora, o mores.*

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