

Flourishing Ivy

WITH THE GUIDING GENIUS OF FERNANDO PEIRE BACK IN CHARGE, THEATRELAND'S FAMED IVY RESTAURANT AND ITS YOUNG SIBLING THE IVY CLUB HAVE RECAPTURED THEIR MOJO, REPORTS NICK FOULKES >

"As I call to mind a typical Ivy lunchtime scene, what a fine sight I have before me. From my table (and I am not making this up, although memory is, of course, sequential and cumulative) I can see David Puttnam importantly reading a script. John Mortimer at his favourite corner table, is beckoning to Stephen Daldry, on his favourite booth banquette. Next to me is Joanna Mackle who, as publishing director of Faber & Faber, must claim some responsibility for Chris Smith's atrocious book. She is lunching with Caroline Michel, wife of Faber's bien pensant friend-of-Rushdie chairman, Matthew Evans. Melvyn, tie loosened, looking hot, fusses in."

In his 1998 classic, *Labour Camp*, Stephen Bayley provides a glorious snapshot of The Ivy in action. This was the high summer of

cool Britannia; London was buzzing, humming and fizzing in a way that it had not done since the 1960s. New Labour was surfing a tide of optimism following its election; the discredited Conservatives were at the beginning of a generation in the wilderness; the War on Terror, the invasion of Iraq and the collapse of the world economy were still in the future. It was a bright shiny time and The Ivy was the works canteen of those who operated the levers of power and pulled the strings of influence in the new world order. As Bayley said: "I don't know where the old establishment lunches, but it is fascinating to watch the mechanical engineering of the New Establishment in grisly action."

And the word engineering is apposite in another sense as well. The Ivy did not just happen to be the hot place of cool Britannia.

Film makers, government ministers, publishers, television personalities, authors and journalists did not just happen to book themselves in for lunch on the same day in a restaurant down a narrow alleyway off the less than salubrious Shaftesbury Avenue, opposite the theatre showing *The Mousetrap*. No. The Ivy is a piece of work, a beautifully crafted machine and yet a machine with a soul... not unlike a racing Bentley really. And to continue with the automotive analogy for a moment, the racing driver at the wheel, piloting his machine through the long hours of the day and night was and is now again, after a prolonged sabbatical, the elfin Fernando Peire, whose mischievous grin and sparking eyes give the same welcome that they did when Bayley recorded his memorable lunch. And it is thanks to Fernando's careful driving and expert handling that, while the New Labour experiment may have failed, The Ivy and its new members' club – hidden speakeasy-style behind a florist on West Street that never sells a single stem – form the leading socio-gastropowerhouse east of Regent Street.

Opened some time during the First World War, the name of The Ivy came from a popular song, which had the line 'we will cling together like the ivy' with which an actress of the day reassured the owner Abel Glandellini that she would continue to patronise his restaurant, even though building works were causing some inconvenience. Together, Glandellini and his maitre d'hotel, Mario Gallati, created a restaurant colossus that bestrode the bohemian theatre world of the years between the wars. But by the late 1940s the sheen had gone, as had Gallati, who opened *Le Caprice* – which became one of the most celebrated restaurants in London while The Ivy began to wither.

However, 20 years ago two very green-fingered gardeners, Jeremy King and Chris Corbin (who had cultivated *Le Caprice*), felt that the Ivy could be nursed back to health and embarked on an ambitious project of refurbishment. I can remember the excitement which attended the reopening of The Ivy in 1990; the art work alone – by David Bailey, Peter Blake, Patrick Caulfield, Howard Hodgkin and Eduardo Paolozzi, among others – made it worth a visit.

But as Fernando, who was chief maitre d' from 1990 until 1998 reveals, during the early 1990s The Ivy was somewhat overshadowed by its Arlington Street stablemate. "We all loved *Le Caprice*, it was a very very hot restaurant; I remember seeing Streisand, Minelli, Clint Eastwood and Liz Taylor there... plus of course the Melvyn Braggs and Harold Pinters that you took for granted. So at first the customers who came to The Ivy were the ones who could not get into *Le Caprice* and it did take us about three years to become seen as the theatre restaurant, which is what we set out to be."

Ever pragmatic, Fernando realised that for actors on the London stage, fame and good reviews did not always translate into big paydays. "There were many times when I simply did not charge actors for drinks." And the thirsty thespians remembered Fernando's kindness when agents and Hollywood casting directors asked them for lunch or dinner. "They would come here and on the way in they would whisper, 'you don't need to worry about the drinks this evening'. That way we gradually built a good relationship with the actors, directors and casting directors and that is what started to make The Ivy rock as a restaurant."

And rock it did. The Ivy effect was to create a bustling brasserie style of atmosphere that was combined with the familiarity of a club; an ambience that while it looked effortless was, in fact, a challenge to achieve. Rather like editing a newspaper, you never know quite what the day will bring, combined with the composition skills of an architect or a painter, Fernando needed to mix the elements at his disposal to create the most pleasing and harmonious result.

Everything played its part. For instance, the size of the menu, which offers something for every taste, would not have been possible without the large kitchen, itself the legacy of Glandellini. Then came the homework, the reading of the 'trade' papers and the gossip columns to know who was doing what with or to whom: hardly wise to seat a director on a table next to a critic who

had panned a show in that morning's paper. In A.A. Gill's book about The Ivy there is a picture of Fernando presumably taken one morning as he is clasping a pile of newspapers under his blazered arm. And then there was the process of editing the guests, confirming tables and deciding who to move from or to the wait list as the number of bookings fluctuated during the hours before service, which is where Fernando's gifts came in. Contrary to what might be expected, it was not a question of just accepting bookings for the most famous people. "I believed and still believe that someone who does something for London should always be able to get a table at The Ivy, so if you are the choreographer at the Royal Ballet, not many people are going to recognise you, but you occupy a prominent place in a certain part of London life. What people don't realise is that the reason the very famous people who made The Ivy famous come is because they are with an agent or a fixer."

And with this formula The Ivy kept on picking up momentum during the 1990s until it achieved the status of the official restaurant of Cool Britannia. And then, in 1998, Fernando left. Chris Corbin and Jeremy King sold their restaurants to the Belgo chain of mussels mega-bars. And, as he saw it, moules-frites and Belgian beer were not on The Ivy menu, or at least the Ivy that he knew and loved... so he went.

The following decade saw him working for other restaurants in London and in the Caribbean, leading the life of the restaurant consultant part of the time as well as that of a Spanish landowner, buying a finca near Jerez and replanting its olive groves. But, wherever he was, two or three times every year he would return to The Ivy... but he did not like the way it was going. "What people really failed to understand was why The Ivy was what it was; it was at least 50 per cent about the way we got on with the people and the social order that was created at The Ivy.

"The menu wasn't changing; I thought it was way off course. And the crowd was abysmal," he says candidly. "They started booking in the famous people they had seen on the TV and in *Big Brother* and all of a sudden the regular customers, people who were very, very well connected, didn't get tables and it didn't take them long to find somewhere else to go.

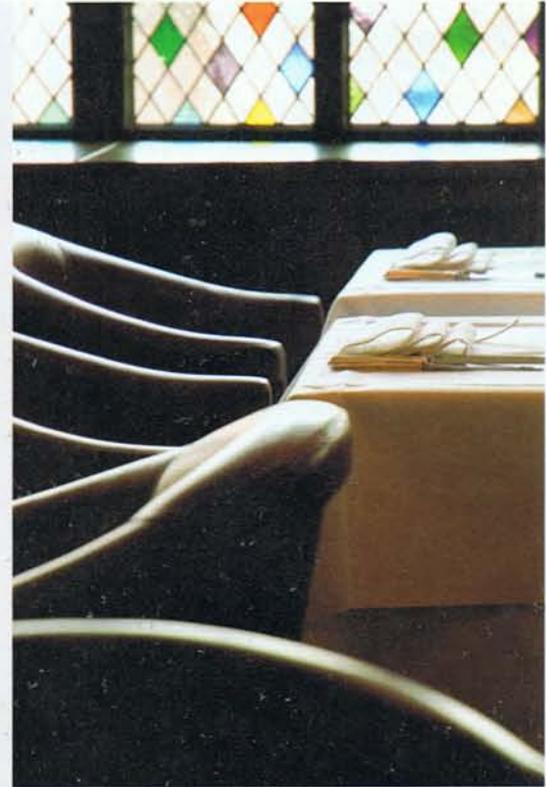
"It had become," he says, searching for an appropriate analogy, "the *Madam Tussaud's* of London restaurants and was heading the same way as *Langan's*. As Truman Capote once said of a tired restaurant in New York: 'It was absolutely full but there was nobody there.'"

By 2007 when he came back, The Ivy had a new owner, Richard Caring. Caring is a fascinating character who broke cover in the mid years of the current decade and embarked on the largest land-grab since Europeans arrived in the New World. He has cornered the market in metropolitan dining in London, buying the Birley Clubs, the Soho House Group and *Caprice Holdings*, of which The Ivy is part. And obviously feeling that the whiff of moules frites had left his beloved West Street, Fernando returned. In a typically shrewd move Caring employed him as director of The Ivy and The Club at The Ivy and appointed him to the board of *Caprice Holdings* (along with Jesus Adorno of *Le Caprice* and executive Chef Tim Hughes, among others). "I walked in, went to the desk and ran a night. It was as if I had never been away."

Fernando is a professional but also someone who likes to do things his own way, and he has been allowed to run things pretty much as he likes and he feels that he has restored the sense of belonging that he cherishes. "If I am eating in Rome, Geneva or Paris, I love to go to a regulars' restaurant, even if I don't know anyone there. The prices are fair and you feel as though you are being looked after properly. That is what The Ivy is about and that is what makes our group particularly good, as it gives each restaurant a feeling of soul; that is going towards the European family restaurant.

"By the time the Club opened, The Ivy downstairs was like a club again, Monday to Friday: people know each other and I know them."

At first I was surprised that The Ivy needed a club. After all, as Fernando points out, I, like many people who flatter themselves into thinking that they know a little bit about life in London, treat The Ivy as a club anyway.



However, there is no denying that the Ivy Club is incredibly well executed: the architectural language of the restaurant has been continued into a series of agreeable drawing rooms, bars and dining rooms; it is the sort of place where you can sit in comfort with a coffee or a cocktail and a newspaper and spend half an hour decompressing after a frenetic day in the capital, while in a neighbouring private room, a film director may be holding a dinner after a West End premier, and in another corner an author and his agent may be toasting the signing of a six or seven figure book deal. As Fernando explains the range of the place from its poker nights to its parties, I begin to see why I might actually like to join.

"You see not everyone felt comfortable walking into The Ivy and sitting at a table on their own or at the bar and ordering a burger and half a bottle of Cheval Blanc, while the Ivy Club is the sort of place where it is a pleasure to come on your own and where waiting to meet someone can be really rather pleasant," says Fernando.

"I still run the desk a couple of nights a week at The Ivy so as to set standards and to let the customers know I have not just defected to the Club. I split my time between both; just as many of the Club members use The Ivy dining room as much as they do the Club dining spaces. The Club is not there to take customers away from The Ivy; it is there as an add-on for those who can afford it and who have the necessary connections to join." Fernando says he knew he was getting it right when one evening he bumped into Spectator Editor Matthew d'Ancona in the club. "I was really pleased when he said to me, 'Fernando, I am beginning to wonder what I did before the Ivy Club.'" **B**

A WORLD OF CAPRICE

Internationally, Caprice Holdings is spreading its wings too, having opened a Rivington Grill last December in The Souk Al Bahar, Old Town (with impressive views onto the Burj Al Arab) in Dubai. This opened to critical acclaim and plaudits from residents and travellers looking for a more down-to-earth dining experience than the endless Michelin-style restaurants that have sprung up in the city. There are more plans afoot for the Middle East. Moving west, Daphne's in Paynes Bay, St James, on the west coast of Barbados, remains a firm favourite among the local glitterati and holiday makers. New York had also been beckoning for some time, but Caprice Holdings waited for the right opportunity, which arrived in the form of the Pierre Hotel on Central Park. Le Caprice will be opening its doors in October at The Pierre, the hotel itself the subject of extensive refurbishment and a relaunch in June.