

CLINGING TOGETHER LIKE THE IVY

Venetia van Kuffeler meets with Fernando Peire, Director of the Ivy restaurant and The Club at the Ivy to hear about this classical institution and its hip, younger sibling

LOCATED IN THE heart of London's West End, The Ivy has long been renowned as an exclusive haunt of the rich and famous. The restaurant came into its first heyday during the 1930s, when well-known diners included Noel Coward and Laurence Olivier; decades on, it remains closely associated with film and theatre stars. I go to meet Fernando Peire, Director of both The Ivy and the newly opened Club at The Ivy, to learn more about this gastronomic institution. Peire is a legend in London's restaurant scene, and I am lucky enough to be granted the second interview he's ever given.

How did it all begin? In 1917 Abel Giandellini purchased an unlicensed café on West Street, opposite the Ambassadors Theatre, and hired a young Italian named Mario Gallati as Maitre d'. The café soon found favour among the theatre community, prompting wider success; as Peire observes, 'Even then, where the actors went, everyone wanted to be.' Giandellini and Gallati set about transforming their modest establishment into a grand restaurant. They re-developed the building in which The Ivy stands today, installing a huge kitchen. Its new name was unwittingly coined by actress Alice Delysia, who, upon overhearing Giandellini apologise to a customer for the inconvenience caused by building works, reassured him by paraphrasing a popular song: 'Don't worry – we will always come and see you. We will cling together like the ivy.'

In 1947, following an unsuccessful bid for a share of the ownership, Gallati quit and went on to join a struggling restaurant, called Le Caprice, which soon became the

most fashionable in town, eclipsing even The Ivy. Giandellini sold The Ivy to Bernard Walsh of Wheelers in 1950, thus ending the restaurant's first golden era.

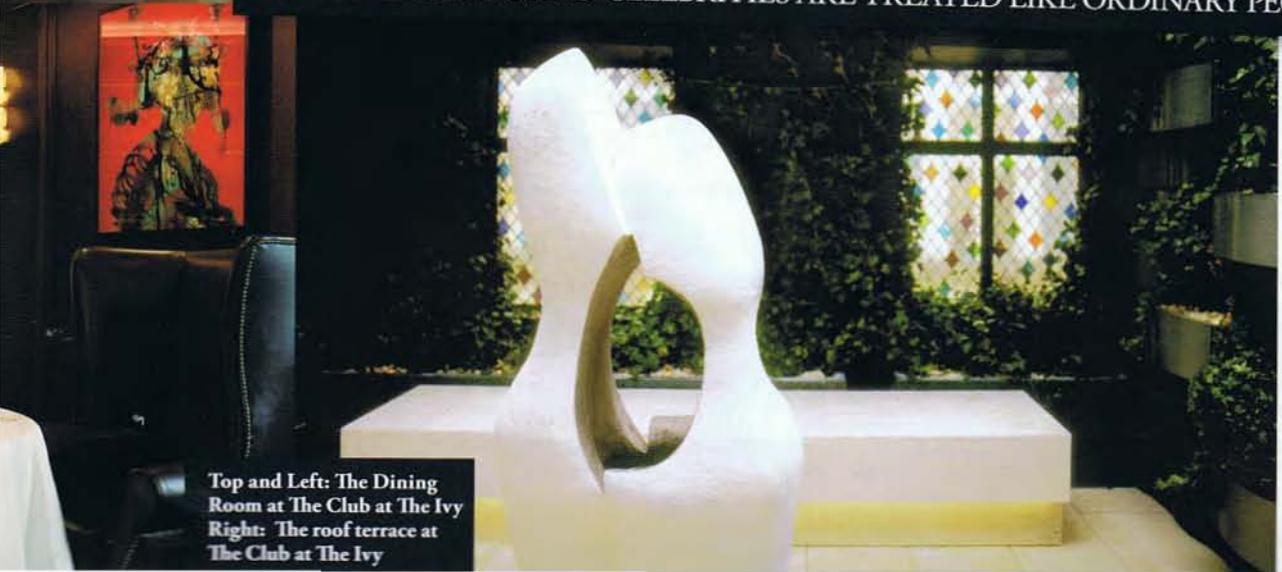
Almost 40 years later, Caprice Holdings – which also owns Le Caprice, J Sheekey and Daphne's, among other top London restaurants – purchased The Ivy, re-launching it in 1990 after an extensive refurbishment. Peire, who joined as Senior Maitre d' that year, explains that much of his knowledge of The Ivy's history comes from a chance encounter, in 1991, with two venerable ladies who arrived at the restaurant without a booking: 'Both in their 80s, they looked so splendid that I sat them in the centre of the room and endeavoured to find out who they were.' One was a former actress who, during the 1930s, would regularly meet her agent there for lunch; as an unmarried mother (deeply controversial at the time), she'd leave her baby upstairs with the lady who ironed the napkins and tablecloths. She knew both Abel Giandellini and Mario Gallati well – years later, after their split, Abel would complain to her about Mario deserting him and opening the new restaurant. Similarly, when she visited Le Caprice (much to Abel's displeasure!), Mario would lament that Abel, in refusing to share ownership, had forced him to leave.

Peire recalls that his early days at The Ivy were challenging: 'We were experiencing a recession, the IRA was holding a bombing campaign and it was an incredibly cold winter. I even remember customers who lived near Green Park coming in on skis. But we worked very hard and did well. It took three years to make it what we wanted it to be: the theatre restaurant

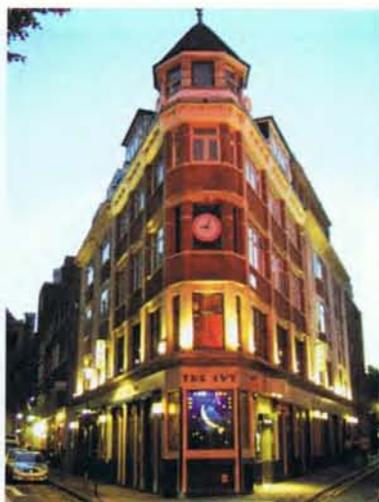




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Top and Left: The Dining Room at The Club at The Ivy
Right: The roof terrace at The Club at The Ivy



in London.' He recalls the moment when Whoopi Goldberg walked in with Frank Langella: 'We already had three or four major Hollywood tables in the restaurant including Meryl Streep, Harrison Ford and Sydney Pollack, who were all table hopping like crazy.' All the hard work had paid off: 'The media had their power lunches during the day and dinner became an incredible party and everyone wanted to be included.'

In 1998 Fernando Peire, having been voted 'Top Restaurant Host' at the British Restaurant Awards, left The Ivy at the peak of its success. He worked for a number of years as a consultant and opened The Frontline Club (the war reporters club in Paddington), before returning in 2007 to become Director of both The Ivy and The Club at the Ivy, a private members club spanning three floors of the same building that houses the restaurant.

THE IVY RESTAURANT TODAY

Behind its distinctive 1920s stained glass windows, The Ivy feeds up to 500 people a day. It is once again firmly ensconced as London's favorite theatre restaurant, and demand for bookings remains fiercely competitive. As restaurant critic AA Gill famously wrote, 'A table at the Ivy is one of the most sought after pieces of furniture in London.'

Furnishings and décor are classic brasserie – leather banquettes, oak panelling and soft lighting. Contemporary art pieces interface

seamlessly with more traditional design elements. For clients entertaining large groups and/or seeking privacy, the restaurant's Private Room is an ideal venue for corporate events, parties or receptions.

To what does Peire attribute The Ivy's continued success? First, he cites the size and breadth of the menu, which virtually guarantees satisfaction by offering approximately 85 dishes from different continents and cuisines. From British classics of roast partridge with bread sauce, shepherd's pie and fish and chips to caviar or Far Eastern dishes of sashimi and Thai fishcakes, the menu confidently spans continents and cuisines, always showcasing ingredients of exceptional quality. Second, it's relatively cheap: although one could easily find ways to spend big, The Ivy's famous hamburger still costs a mere £13.75. The final element Peire mentions is 'the buzz', which he puts down to both the configuration of the space and the skill of the Maitre d', whose business it is to remember regular guests' table preferences, partners' names, favourite wines, etc. At The Ivy, the saying goes, ordinary people are treated like celebrities and celebrities are treated like ordinary people.

THE CLUB AT THE IVY

Instead of competing with the restaurant, The Club at The Ivy has only strengthened it, allowing more people to access the brand.

Designed by Martin Brudnizki, The Club opened quietly in early

2008 and has since emerged as London's leading private members club. The Piano Bar on the first floor is perfect for meetings during the day or cocktails at night (the elderflower and cucumber martini is unbeatable). The Dining Room on the second floor serves an a la carte breakfast menu from 8am. In the tradition of The Ivy restaurant, it is consistently booked up for lunch and dinner, but its atmosphere is different from the restaurant – not nearly so loud. For smokers, The Loft on the fourth floor features an adjoining terrace with heated stone seats. Art abounds – Peire proudly shows me pieces by Damien Hirst, Maggie Hambling and Tracy Emin, to name but a few.

Open all day and late into the night, The Club hosts regular events including quiz nights, wine tastings, martini master classes and 'Intimate at The Ivy' interviews with well known figures. There is even a concierge service.

Getting down to the nitty-gritty, I challenge Peire on membership. He concedes that The Club at The Ivy is already over-subscribed; however there are a few spots available for people who fall into categories that are currently under-represented: 'Professions such as the diplomatic service would add to the already dynamic international membership.'

Whether it's a special dinner or a private members club that you're looking for, The Ivy offers unparalleled history, exclusivity, quality and atmosphere. Fernando Peire wouldn't have it any other way.



THE IVY

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