

The director's perspective: Fernando Peire

Fernando Peire breezes into the room at The Ivy Club wearing a smart bespoke suit, a shirt that looks like it was pressed just seconds before we meet and a smile that greets me like an old friend, even though we've never previously met. In a matter of seconds we are seated in the club's comfortable leather chairs with drinks in front of us (still water for me, tea with milk and honey for my host) and my tape recorder running - he makes me double-check to ensure it's on. In these first few moments, and without even thinking about it, Peire has demonstrated why The Ivy is regularly named by Londoners as their favourite restaurant - it topped the *Harden's* guide for nine consecutive years between 1997 and 2005 (it is now seventh). If you can infiltrate its walls you'll be met with a smile, slick service and the feeling that you are being looked after like royalty.

Peire doesn't work at The Ivy, he *is* The Ivy. And, having worked there almost since the day Corbin and King brought it back from the dead in 1990, The Ivy is also very much Peire. Corbin and King are best known as the front-of-house alchemists behind its rebirth, but it was Peire's project as well. "I visited The Ivy as a customer twice and didn't enjoy it," he says. "I asked them [Chris and Jeremy] to give me a job because I thought they needed to change their ways and be a bit more friendly and less formal. People come to a place like this feeling quite nervous on their first visit; they are quite intimidating places. You need to give people a friendly face."

Everything that people like about The Ivy - the customer service, the prestige, the feeling of being in the 'inner circle' - and everything they dislike - the inability to get a table, the elitism, the secrecy - is Peire's doing. But while all these aspects seem to be part of the restaurant's DNA from day one, it took meticulous planning and time to achieve.

"I joined at the end of the '80s boom, which was a tricky time. There was recession, the IRA were planting bombs and there was a terrible winter. Against that background we decided to re-establish The Ivy as a theatre restaurant - that was the job I was given. A lot of folk who remembered The Ivy

It was a planned attack to get the theatre community to come in here. And it worked



Style and mystery: The Ivy's interior is rarely seen in photos

times a night and then go to the theatre at least twice a week - the idea is if you know about the theatre when people come in you can talk about it with them and there's a connection. We act as if we're throwing a party and we're meeting new guests and they might become your 'friends' - it's sophisticated social engineering, of sorts."

He got to know the actors and the behind-the-scenes people, from casting directors to set designers, and got a programme for every single theatre. "It was a planned attack to get the theatre community to come in here. And it worked. But it took about three years to do it."

from Noël Coward's day were coming back, but to get everybody back wasn't so easy."

Peire's approach was to chase the theatre crowd shamelessly. "I used to work as a maitre d' five

The result was a restaurant that not just theatre-goers, but everyone wanted to be a part of. "In the early '90s it was the restaurant you knew you wanted to be in, instead of the one down the road," says restaurant critic and The Ivy regular AA Gill. "One of the greatest joys of my life was being able to eat there in the early '90s."

Peire left in August 1998 when The Ivy was sold to the Belgo chain, fronted by Luke Johnson - "as soon as the deal was announced I resigned. I didn't want to work for a PLC" - but returned in May 2007 after the restaurant had been bought by Richard Caring. "When I left it was a devastating decision. I had put my life into it for eight years. It was my baby. I came back because Richard convinced me that it would be interesting and profitable to come back, not only to sprinkle a bit of stardust on it, but to launch a club."

The Club at The Ivy opened in September 2008 and is housed on three floors above the restaurant. Membership is by invitation only, with

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many of The Ivy regulars being raised to the upper echelons in acknowledgement of their loyalty. The feel is similar though, with wooden floors and leather chairs an ongoing theme, although the art is a little more edgy - one display features two rather striking old-fashioned syringes.

How much does The Ivy today resemble the restaurant of the early '90s? The demographic has changed, for one. "The club has brought the average age down by 10 years, which is a really good thing," says Peire. "Some have graduated to the club and left The Ivy behind as if they've gone from prep school to big school, but an awful lot still use the restaurant." Yet the restaurant remains as busy, and as hard to get into as ever. In fact, in many cases, it's harder.

"We are always full at peak time - between 6.30pm and 10pm. I don't like to run an empty

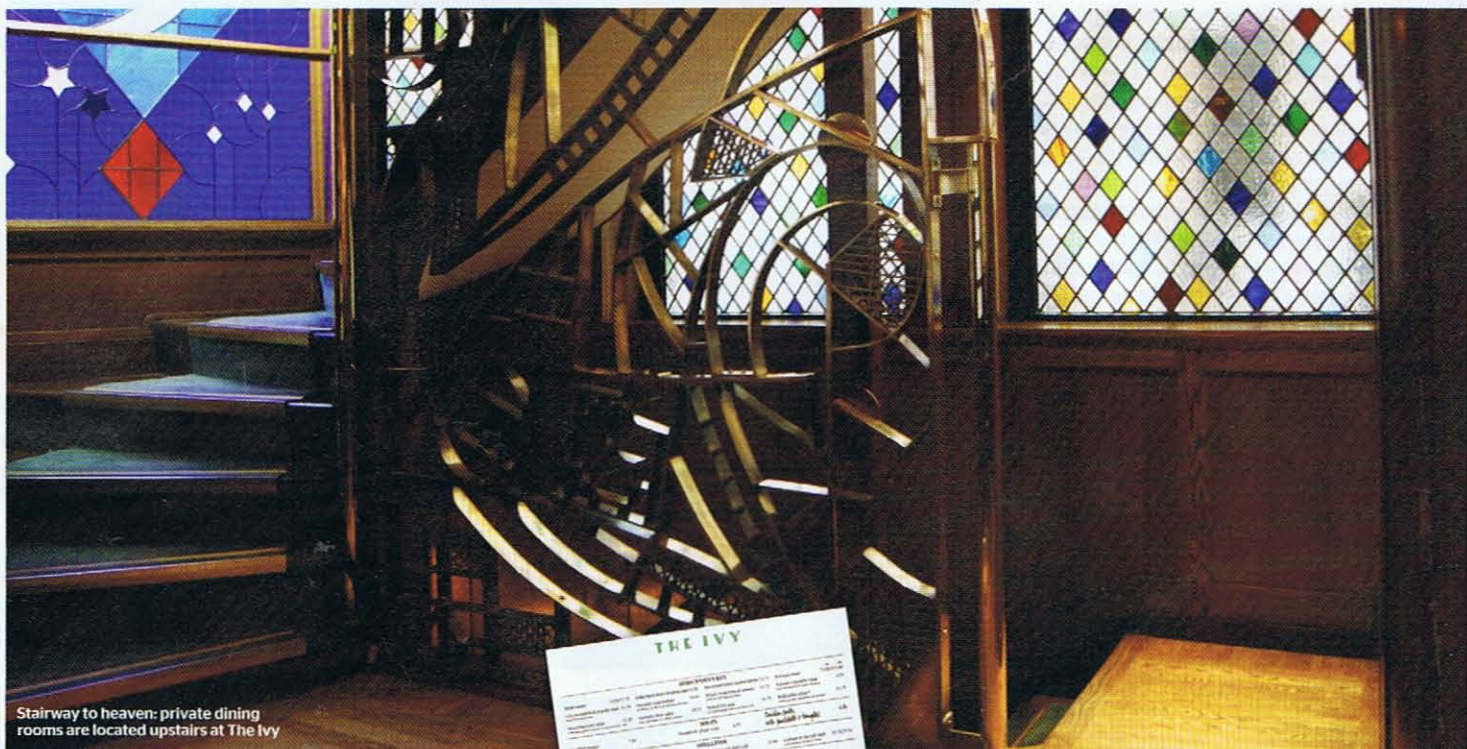
restaurant. I teach my staff that if you lead a guest through a full dining room to the only empty table that is restaurant nirvana. You can only achieve it if you fill it early and keep it full.

"When I came back the first thing I did was make it impossible to get in again because as long as you phoned up six months in advance you could have a table - that's utter madness. We're not Madame Tussauds, but a living restaurant. I don't even like people phoning a month ahead. I'd rather they phoned three or four days in advance and took their chance. Then you have nice customers. Not many foreign visitors used to come because we allowed people to book so far in

advance, but now we keep back a proportion of tables for them."

Tourists? This doesn't sound like The Ivy of old. And indeed it isn't. Together with chef Gary Lee, Peire is creating a new personality. "The Ivy will never relive what it went through in the '90s where you could have six tables of Hollywood actors in the restaurant," says Peire. "It was the beginning of the upturn that lasted for years. Now it's all about musicals. We'll write a different future along similar lines."

And what of the next 20 years - will they be as eventful as the last two decades? "In the next 20 years it will be sold by Richard," says Peire. "Someone will end up as the new owner and I suspect that, unless it's taken over by a genius, its reputation will wane again. Maybe 50 years later, if it's still standing, someone will resuscitate it." ■

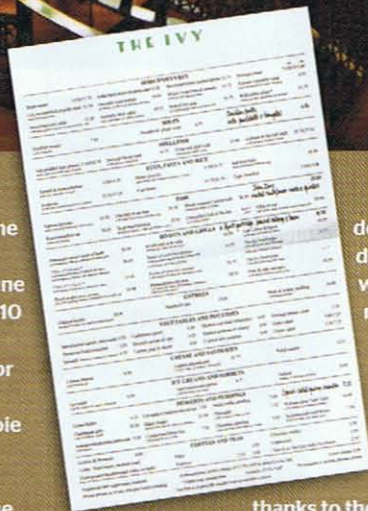


Stairway to heaven: private dining rooms are located upstairs at The Ivy

The menu

Few menus have undergone such scrutiny as that of The Ivy, whose blend of classic British and Mediterranean cuisine and hearty comfort food is arguably more in tune with today's style of eating than in any of the previous 10 years. The menu has always charmed and shocked in equal measure - charmed regulars happy to come in for nothing more than a pie or kedgerree and shocked first-time diners with expectations of fine dining and foie gras. It's also fair to say that, despite often being overshadowed by the glitz and glamour of those who frequent The Ivy, it is the menu that's the true star of the restaurant, its magnum opus.

"The menu was Chris and Jeremy's masterpiece," says AA Gill. "They included on it signifiers such as 'savouries', like their scotch woodcock. Few people would order it, but it showed the kind of food the kitchen could cook. When opening a restaurant, most restaurateurs look at the



decor and furnishings and with two weeks to go ask, 'Who's done the menu?' Jeremy and Chris knew how important it was. There is no minimum spend. If you were rich for six months and brassic for three, you could still go and eat."

Dishes have come and gone but, like the loyal regulars themselves, many have stood the test of time. Originals still on the menu include The Ivy hamburger, Caesar salad, rib eye steak, Welsh rarebit, sticky toffee pudding, baked Alaska, eggs Benedict, Scandinavian iced berries and dressed Cornish crab. Other classics have left,

thanks to the whims of the head chef at the time. While Gary Lee consigned Bang Bang Chicken to the menu graveyard, former exec chef Alan Bird culled a dish of focaccia, avocado and shaved Parmesan. "There was always a fight to get the tomato and basil galette off the menu," recalls Bird. "The Queen came for lunch one day and ordered it at the time I was trying to get rid of it, which didn't help." It is currently off the menu.