

WEEKEND JOURNAL.

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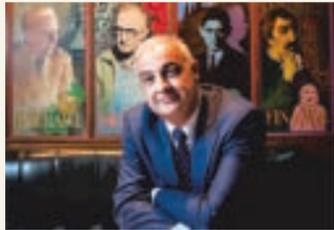
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Illustration by Jean-Manuel Duvivier

The real meaning of Bonfire Night

[European Life]

BY SAM LEITH IN LONDON



"November the fifth has been and gone, but memories still linger," we used to sing as schoolchildren. "I

held a banger in my hand. Has anyone seen my finger?" The most atavistic and hazardous of all English festivals, Bonfire Night—at which public bonfires are lit and fireworks ignited in memory of the 1605 Catholic conspiracy to blow up Parliament—is upon us, and this weekend will be marked by the snap and pop of distant fireworks struggling through the drizzle.

Guy Fawkes Night moves sluggishly with the times. You don't get smudge-cheeked urchins dragging around a set of straw-stuffed pajamas asking "a penny for the Guy" anymore, for instance. Children aren't encouraged to beg, and have been positively deterred from buying fireworks ever since the advent of a generation that decided it was even funnier to push them through letterboxes than to tie them to cats.

Some of the traditions remain, but either through faint embarrassment or health-and-safety legislation, they are on the peripheries, in London's second- and third-tier public spaces like Ravenscourt, Battersea and Victoria parks, Clapham and Wimbledon. There, celebrants can find what they seek: dogs with trembling legs and cats with flattened ears, dim-witted older brothers returning ill-advisedly to lit fireworks, rampaging children, minor injuries, toffee apples and hypothermia.

In late December, the radio generally fills with toothy Church of England vicars urging us to remember the "real meaning of

Christmas." These vicars seem to be less forward, though, when it comes to reminding us of "the real meaning of Bonfire Night": That is, a ritual celebration of anti-Catholic mob violence.

In the seaside town of Lewes in the southeast of England, where they do these things properly, pyrotechnic anarchy reigns. Barrels of burning tar are hauled through the streets and rival bonfire societies compete—according to a friend who grew up there—like mafias at war. Outsiders are advised to steer well clear. Tradition dictates that the pope is burned in effigy, to the accompaniment of a jolly song that ends: "Burn him in a tub of tar! Burn him like a blazing star! Burn his body from his head! Then we'll say: 'The pope is dead.' Hip, hip, hurrah! Hip, hip hurrah!"

In most other parts of the country, it is considered bad manners to burn effigies of the pope. But this Bonfire Night comes at a time when anti-Catholic feeling is as high in the U.K. as, I suspect, in recent memory. Secularists, chief among them Richard Dawkins, have taken a dim view of the Vatican's role in the global child-abuse scandal, and the Holy Father's intolerance of homosexuality and staunch line against condoms are added to the charge sheet. Some taxpayers, more prosaically, objected to footing the bill for his state visit, and nobody succeeded in placing him under arrest.

I wondered, therefore, if we might see Bonfire Night taking on some of its old pointedness. On the other hand, the Houses of Parliament aren't currently held in the highest of esteem either, so a certain rosy fondness attaches itself to early-modern plots to blow them up. The two might cancel each other out.

Hungry for meat

The likeable television cook Jamie Oliver has announced the

opening of a new restaurant, called Barbecoa, dedicated entirely to meat of the high-welfare, non-intensively-farmed variety. It boasts a robata grill, two Indian tandoors, an Argentinian fire pit, a Texas smoker and "a wood-fired oven the size of a minibus." The only vegetarian dish on the menu, apart from the odd side salad, is a bowl of olives.

He's on trend. Fergus Henderson, of St. John, got things started with "nose-to-tail eating." In Smiths of Smithfield, we've a four-floor temple to charred flesh on the actual site of a meat market; Roast does what its name suggests; and steak houses and posh burger joints are everywhere. London is becoming as carnivorous as Beijing, Buenos Aires or Bilbao. We all know in our heads we must eat less meat, but the smell of these places opens separate negotiations with the stomach. I find myself looking at police horses hungrily.

Bad Sex Prize

The end of this month sees the awarding of Literary Review's Bad Sex Prize: an eccentric but beloved fixture in the literary calendar. The magazine has a big party at the In and Out Club, where a prize is given for the most embarrassing and redundant passage of sexual description in a work of literary fiction, and the offending text read out by actresses in mocking voices. If the winner shows up, he or she will generally be in a foul temper, yet pretending to be gracious, which adds to the fun. Tony Blair's memoirs have been put forward; more suggestions may be sent to editorial@literaryreview.co.uk. It would be nice to see an international flavor to the shortlist, though it's perhaps too much to hope for a joint winner with the Goncourt.

Next week,
Francis X. Rocca in Rome

Barbara Tina Fuhr Editor
Beth Schepens Deputy Editor
Brian M. Carney Books Page Editor

Carlos Tovar Art Director
Elisabeth Limber Weekend Art Director

Questions or comments? Write to wsj.weekend@wsj.com.
Please include your full name and address.

COVER STORY



The Ivy: Steeped in celebrity

Jemima Sissons goes behind the scenes for a cookery lesson in London's famous kitchen

When I arrive on a bright recent morning at 10 a.m., the large stainless steel kitchen is a hive of activity. In scenes reminiscent of Macbeth, 100-liter copper vats of lobster bisque bubble away, as trays of claws are thrown inside to stew and froth. Giant cauldrons of beetroot simmer and splutter; they will soon be turned into a salad with mimosas, rapeseed oil and mint. Over in the pastry section, sleeping armies of tortellini are being prepared at lightening speed, next to fragrant, freshly cooked *tuiles* and trays of pistachio nuts. Delivery boys unload trays of wild chanterelle mushrooms and boxes of pungent Asian herbs—including Vietnamese mint, wild pepper and banana leaves, which in a few hours, will be wrapped around sea bass fillets and served with soya beans and a sweet coconut dressing.

I am at the Ivy—arguably London's most exclusive restaurant—where everyone from public relations mogul Roland Rudd and publisher Lord Weidenfeld to Jude Law and Kate Hudson gather for a bit of afternoon respite.

Rather than a slowly evolving tale, the story of the Ivy is unapologetically scripted, and that is the secret of its success. Although The Ivy opened in 1916, it closed in 1989 and was then bought by restaurateurs Jeremy King and Chris Corbin 20 years ago (they sold it to Signature Restaurants in 1998, which in turn, sold to fashion magnate Richard Caring as part of Caprice Holdings in 2005). The Ivy was re-imagined with a single goal in mind: “to become *‘the’* theater restau-

rant in London,” says Fernando Peire, who joined the eclectic, modern British-meets-international-type-of-cuisine Ivy when it opened as *maitre d'*, and after a nine-year break, returned as restaurant director. The Ivy serves reasonably priced, good quality food (a three-course lunch or dinner is around £48 a head, without wine). There are no airs to win Michelin stars or to make its chef a TV celebrity. The only celebrity sought is the one that walks through the door.

As part of a tie-in with the Covent Garden restaurant's 20th anniversary in its present incarnation, I am the first journalist to have been invited into the kitchen to learn how to make some of the restaurant's most popular dishes, such as Moroccan spiced rump of lamb and steak tartare. Since Senior Head Chef Gary Lee arrived three years ago from Bam-Bou, another Caprice Holdings restaurant, he has introduced more Asian flavors to the menu such as aromatic duck and watermelon salad with fragrant herbs and pickled ginger and sashimi, but continues to serve perennial favorites such as dressed crab with celeriac remoulade and shepherd's pie.

As part of the celebration, the restaurant will transform into a theater Nov. 8-12. Sir Ronald Harwood has written a play titled “Heavenly Ivy” especially for the anniversary, which will be performed during the evenings around the diners.

In the kitchen, Chef Lee puts me immediately to work on crab salad followed by steak tartare. I prepare a precarious stack of sweet white crab meat and brown crab meat may-

onnaise, mix some mustard mayonnaise into the celeriac remoulade and add an artistic flourish of Greek cress. It tastes delicious; the crab meat is sweet and tender, with a beautifully tangy remoulade—although the impeccable ingredients speak higher volumes than my preparation skills. “Good start,” he says, encouragingly. My steak tartare, however, is less impressive. After the intensely satisfying task of grinding the topside through the mammoth mincer, taking care

One legendary night Danny DeVito, Deborah Winger and Sydney Pollack were there with Brad Pitt, Terry Gilliam and Harrison Ford. 'I doubt there will be nights like this ever again.'

not to handle it too much to destroy its shape, I add Tabasco, chopped gherkin and Worcester sauce. Chef Lee tells me I have to constantly taste it. My chili addiction nearly puts this one at the extreme end of the taste spectrum, and I need to add more olive oil.

Junior chefs come up to Chef Lee constantly and ask him to taste their sauces, or check their progress, and he is encouraging, yet firm, correcting one young woman for making the shrimp cracker pieces too big.

Chef Lee adopts a democratic approach, pulling staff into the chilled prep room for a

quiet word if an unruly turnip peeling or egg shell makes its way into the bin, rather than a stock pot. But Mr. Lee is certainly no hotheaded Gordon Ramsay and that morning the kitchen appears delightfully calm and jolly before the mad lunchtime rush.

It is 11.30 a.m. and Chef Lee gathers the troops after the staff meal for a pep talk. He gets straight to the point, describing the plan for the day. “Yes chef,” they say in unison, as he talks through the list of regulars, and where they are sitting. Literary agent Caroline Michel is in today and so is former BBC Chairman Sir Michael Grade.

Precisely at noon, lunchtime kicks off. Immediately orders start to come in. I plate up some Moroccan lamb—the perfectly pink meat is sliced and stacked on the plate, surrounded by a dash of bright red harissa, folds of homemade hummus and some lemony smoked aubergine. While there is a lot of talk behind the scenes of every customer being equal and the policy by which the kitchen is run, some guests appear to be more equal than others.

“VIP,” I learn is printed on the orders of the Ivy's most revered guests, and as I plate up some delicate pillows of spinach and ricotta tortellini, I eagerly await the arrival of such a ticket. Four hours into the service and still, disappointingly, no VIPs. What does it take? I wonder. As if on cue, Mr. Lee's voice comes bellowing through the kitchen: “Sienna Miller on table two,” he shouts, and you get the feeling the shrimp crackers will be perfectly proportioned and on that particular plate. The staff shares

COVER STORY



Clockwise from left page, the Ivy's Head Chef Gary Lee and Jemima Sissons by cauldrons of bubbling beetroot; Moroccan spiced rump of lamb with hummus, harissa and smoked aubergine; Fernando Peire, the Ivy's director in front of a work by English artist Tom Phillips in The Bar; steak tartare—an Ivy classic and the Ivy's famous stained glass windows, help to keep out prying eyes.

other tidbits. Michael Winner always sits on table 21, has a burger and is in and out in lightening speed, according to one of the sous-chefs. One theater-world couple comes in three or four times a week and have to have their food mouth-burningly hot. And Dustin Hoffman always orders off menu: Los Angeles staple, the egg-white omelet.

In the private-members club above the restaurant, as lunch service dies down, Mr. Peire, the director, has a debonair quality of someone who knows how to negotiate the tightropes and egos of the restaurant's most esteemed guests. "They told me that I was going to have to get to know the theater world and try and get them to come," he explains of his mission for the Ivy. "It took going to two matinees a week and one evening performance for five years for this to happen. I got to know the behind-the-scenes people such as the agents. I was pretty sure that having met a few actors they were always with people in the business and those people are not necessarily faces."

Also, the Ivy's timing was perfect. It was post-recession and a lot of restaurants had closed down. With a shift from old money to new, the power lunch had also moved from the stuffier hotel restaurants to the West End. It was also when droves of Hollywood stars such as Kathleen Turner and Kevin Spacey began appearing in the West End. "It was all to do with coincidence, and the Ivy opened at a magical time," Mr. Peire says, recalling evenings "like Rick's bar in Casablanca—four or five tables of stars having a knees-up." One legendary night, Danny

DeVito, Debra Winger and Sydney Pollack were there with Brad Pitt, Terry Gilliam and Harrison Ford, he adds. "I doubt there will be nights like this ever again."

One of the things that makes the Ivy special is the clubby atmosphere in the restaurant and that is what people come here for. "We do all sorts of things to get the party going, the way you sit people, the way you walk them around the room to their table. This is how you end up getting Omar Sharif hugging Tony Curtis in the middle of the room," Mr. Peire says. Although sometimes they have to be careful, he warns: "If someone is the arch enemy of someone else you can't sit them opposite each other. It used to happen a lot with Harold Pinter as he was always falling out with people. What we've created at the Ivy is the fact that we control who comes in and where they sit."

How have things changed since the Ivy opened? For one, the era of the ad-boy power lunch is over, and it has been a conscious decision to move the clientele from advertising (as it was during the '90s) to showbiz. "When you have this many tables and that much demand, you think, who do I want, these people or those people," Mr. Peire says. "People in London are eating earlier than ever—particularly midweek." Blaming the Blackberry, he adds: "They just don't want to get to bed so late now knowing they will have a hundred emails to deal with by 8 a.m."

For mere mortals who want to try their luck, chances are that walk-ins at 10.30 p.m. might be able to get a table, but only if they aren't autograph hunters. "We rugby tackle

them to the floor before they can get to the guests' table," he explains.

While Hollywood stars may now be less frequent visitors, if you want to book in advance (which you can do online), it is still no easier getting a table and the guest list is still controlled as tightly as ever. Regulars will always take precedence, Mr. Peire says. "I remember a big night, when one table for Mick Jagger ended up being for 10 people, which put us two tables behind. But you get away with it, as the people that you've kept waiting have seen Mick Jagger, had a few complimentary rounds of drinks at the bar, and have their food standing by. You make sure they sit next to the special party, and we put it right."

Who are The Ivy's best guests? The ones that know what they want, Mr. Peire contends, recalling one night when a man sat down with his wife: "Very well dressed. Typical Bostonians. All perfectly first class." He asked them if he could get them a drink. "He said nothing, but just handed me a card—embossed copperplate. It said simply something along the lines of: 'My wife will have a Tanqueray Martini, straight up with a twist in a stemmed glass, I will have a Chivas Regal, water on the side.' He was obviously so sick and tired of telling people and it coming wrong. Genius, I thought."

As I leave, I pass a grand piano in the bar. "That's Kate Moss's seat," he says, pointing to the piano stool. "I tell her, darling, if it's before midnight, no karaoke, but after, I let her." Even Ms. Moss, it seems, cannot call the shots here.

The Ivy's steak tartare

Serves four

500g very fresh lean fillet, sirloin or topside steak, minced
3 shallots, peeled and finely chopped
2 tbsp capers, chopped
½ tsp tomato ketchup
2-3 tsp Worcester sauce
A few dashes Tabasco or more if you wish
1 tbsp olive oil
Salt & pepper

Ask your butcher to mince the meat through a clean mincer or, better still, do it yourself if you have a mincer attachment for your mixing machine.

Place all the ingredients in a bowl and mix together with a fork. Check the seasoning, you may wish to add a little more Tabasco, ketchup or Worcester sauce.

Spoon the steak tartare onto a plate or, if you prefer, push it into a ramekin to mould, then turn it out onto a plate to serve.

Serve with fine cut chips, green salad or toast.

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ONLINE TODAY: For more recipes from The Ivy, go to WSJ.com.