



The
ART

OF FINE DINING

Art and dining - a good relationship? *TAMSIN PICKERAL*
finds out at four of London's Michelin-starred restaurants



IN 1958, THE AMERICAN Abstract Expressionist painter, Mark Rothko, was commissioned to paint four large works to decorate the interior of New York's finest new restaurant, the Four Seasons. Designed by architects Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson, the Four Seasons was destined to become a hub for New York's elite diners and has continued as such since its opening in 1959. It is famous for the art works on its walls, and equally renowned for those that never arrived. After two years of tireless work on the commission during which time he produced several large series of paintings, Rothko commented to a journalist that he hoped to 'ruin the appetite of every son of a bitch who ever eats in that room'. Shortly after, the artist withdrew from the commission returning his payment, and the paintings already undertaken in the series were dispersed. Nine of the majestic and sombre pieces now hang in Tate Modern, being amongst the most important works by an Abstract Expressionist painter in this country.

The details surrounding the Four Seasons fiasco are unclear. Some suggest Rothko set out to be deliberately subversive in his approach, others just that he was so inspired by Italian works and interiors. Whatever the case, his paintings evolved into pieces simply unsuitable for the frivolity of a restaurant interior. In itself, this raises the question of art and identity, being one that is of particular interest in relation to today's fine-dining establishments. Art and food, it would seem, are becoming increasingly collaborative on both fronts: some of London's top restaurants are ▶▶



From top / Pied à Terre
Le Gavroche

also home to fine and eclectic art collections, whilst some such as Sketch in Mayfair have become virtual artworks themselves. The restaurant marked its tenth anniversary by commissioning artist Martin Creed, winner of the Turner Prize in 2001, to completely redesign the interior and create a vibrant environment, part restaurant, part artwork. The design extended across every aspect including the menus, crockery, furniture, flooring and walls with each and every item having an individual design – even the food is partially influenced by Creed’s inspired space. The result is a chaos of colour and sensory delight; fun, exuberant and endlessly entertaining, it is art as experience.

Very different in atmosphere is the elegant, traditional interior of the acclaimed Le Gavroche on Upper Brook Street, where an impressive art collection,

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reflective of Albert and Michel Roux Senior and Junior’s tastes, lines the walls. Michel Roux Junior, who has been chef patron since 1991, is a keen art collector and the works on the walls of the restaurant are a reflection of his own personal predilections. The most recently purchased (and also his current favourite) works at Le Gavroche are a series of paintings by William Balthazar Rose, the Chef Collection, which combine ironic humour with an arresting naïve-type style. Though these have a tangible ‘restaurant association’, the majority of the artworks here do not, and include stunning prints and drawings by Picasso, Miro and Dalí and a number of fabulous pieces by contemporary Irish artist Pauline Bewick; Bewick also designed all the plates used in the restaurant. French sculptor Gérard Bouvier works closely with the restaurant and exhibits one-off animal sculptures on each dining table that add to the lively table dressing. Each is crafted from cutlery and available to purchase. Michel admits to buying pieces and then having to find the wall space to accommodate them. This sense of spontaneity lends Le Gavroche an incredibly comfortable atmosphere; there is no element of contrived interior scheme or pretention, which is wholly appealing. He believes that art should make you think and ask questions of your inner thoughts: provoking a reaction is what art is all about. ‘However,’ he says, ‘some art is just too confrontational to be appropriate to the dining room’.



From top / The Ivy
A table in the top room at Sketch

Opposite /Vegetables à la grecque at Le Gavroche



At Pied à Terre in Charlotte Street, an exciting and original art project is heading into its second year. This is the 'artist in restaurant' idea, the brainchild of owner and art collector David Moore. The programme offers one artist (chosen by a panel of artistic luminaries) the chance to spend eight months at the restaurant creating works that are then exhibited in a solo show in the restaurant in October. The artist is given free rein to create whatever works they please, inspired by the restaurant, food and atmosphere, a freedom that is potentially somewhat nerve-wracking for Moore. Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva, last year's artist, produced a series of abstract sculptural and installation works largely crafted from materials found in the restaurant, extending to fish skins and quail carcasses – there was initial concern over the smell!

The pieces are stunning, certainly not to all diners tastes, but without question a talking point. Several of Elpida's pieces have remained within the restaurant's permanent collection alongside works by Richard Hamilton, Howard Hodgkin and Peter Blake. Current artist in residence, Anna Freeman, is exploring the dynamics of space within the restaurant and the relationship of these spaces to the staff and diners, largely through paintings that incorporate rich, sumptuous colour with striking abstracted and geometric form. The concept of the residency brings together art and food in a unique and inspirational manner. Moore

is as passionate about his art as he is his food. This is a restaurant frequented by artists and wholly unafraid of pushing boundaries. The late and great Richard Hamilton who died last year and was the grandfather of British Pop Art was a close friend of Moore's. His works hang on the walls – some of them donated – and he was many years ago an initial investor in the business; art, it seems, runs close to the heart of this sophisticated restaurant.

Art is also integral to the atmosphere at The Ivy, in the heart of Covent Garden's theatre land. Indeed, many of the works such as Tom Phillips' glass partition and Patrick Caulfield's stained glass window, *Paper Moon*, on the front street façade and Sir Eduardo Paolozzi's brass strap installation were specially commissioned. The Ivy has long been frequented by artists and actors; it still is, and many of its regular dinner guests have their artworks on the walls including Bridget Riley, Maggi Hambling, Sir Peter Blake and the late and superbly eccentric Sebastian Horsley. The Ivy Club opened in 2008 and two doors down from the restaurant it holds an impressive contemporary art collection. The attitude throughout is bold – it would be difficult to miss or ignore works in The Ivy, works that are part and parcel of the entire restaurant's character which is semi effortless glamour and semi bohemian heaven.

In each of these restaurants, the artworks form an essential part of the entire dining experience that extends from the entrances to the cloakrooms and all in between. These are places where enthusiasm and support for the arts is evident and there is passion at work that parallels that for the food and lends them their unique and wonderful characters. It is of course an added bonus that one can enjoy these art works while indulging in some of London's finest cuisine. ■

