

# Masters *at* work

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With two openings this year to follow the debut of The Delaunay, Corbin and King are very much back in business

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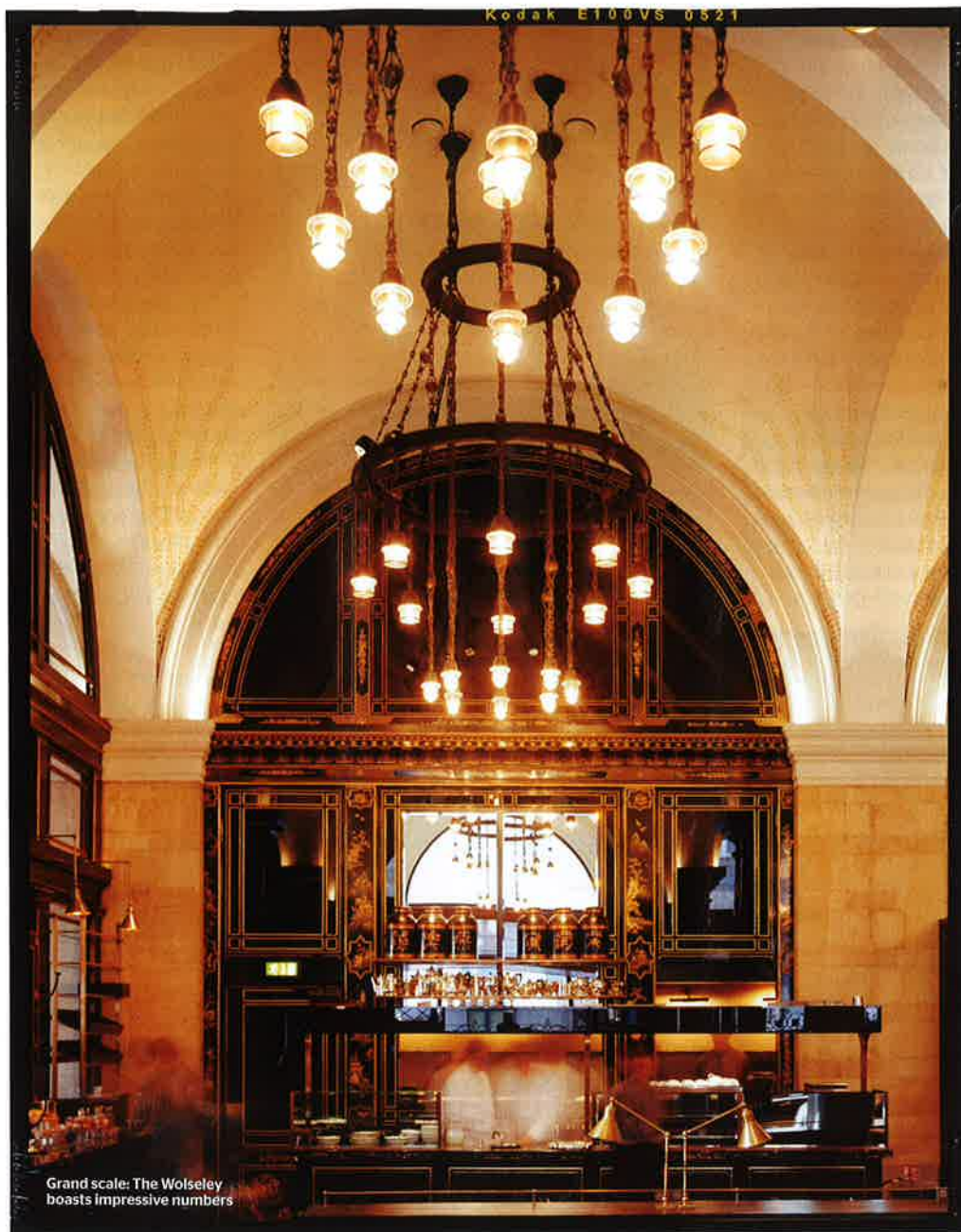
Chris Corbin



Jeremy King

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Words  
William Drew



Grand scale: The Wolseley boasts impressive numbers

In June, the UK's biggest restaurant opening of the year will take place just off Piccadilly Circus. Big in literal terms - at some 20,000sq ft, the footprint dwarfs even the new breed of all-you-can-eat buffet concepts. Big in impact terms because it revives one of the capital's most iconic Art Deco buildings. And big in terms of industry significance, simply because it represents the next project from Chris Corbin and Jeremy King, arguably the UK's most respected restaurateurs.

The restaurant is Brasserie Zédel and the location is the former Atlantic Bar and Grill site, itself within the former Regent Palace Hotel, where the famous Art Deco interior has been restored as part of the Crown Estate's major redevelopment programme of recent years.

Corbin and King, who own and operate London restaurants The Wolseley and newly opened The Delaunay through their company Rex Restaurant Associates (RexRA), are very much back on a roll. Brasserie Zédel represents the next, albeit major, step in a series of projects coming to fruition after several years of relative quiet, as the pair attempted to sort out some corporate structural and financial wranglings - now largely resolved.

Hot on the heels of Brasserie Zédel will come Café Colbert, located on Chelsea's Sloane Square and due to open in September this year. Meanwhile, RexRA's most ambitious project to date - a brand new luxury boutique hotel, developed in partnership with property group Grosvenor - is under construction, with an opening pencilled in for early 2014.

It's quite a schedule, especially considering the

duo left a gap of nine years between opening Le Caprice in 1981 and taking over The Ivy in 1990, and a further eight years before adding J Sheekey to their Caprice Holdings portfolio in 1998 [see *Corbin and King* panel, over page]. The rush is in part coincidence - both the Atlantic and Oriel sites have been under discussion or negotiation for several years - but in part down to the company's new-found freedom.

In short, Corbin and King owned 50% of RexRA, but the remaining half had effectively come under the control of the administrators of property group Dawnay Day when the latter collapsed in 2008. Though the founding pair retained a veto over the sale of any shares, they were somewhat hamstrung without full control of the business. The opening of The Delaunay, however, prompted the parties to agree the sale of the remaining 50% to Corbin and

King, who have in turn recruited new investors and funding.

### Democratic dining

It's a happy time, then, for the veteran operators after well over 30 years in the restaurant game (Corbin celebrates his 60th birthday this month, while King is a few years younger). The Wolseley continues to rack up extraordinary numbers, regularly serving upwards of 1,200 people on a Saturday, and The Delaunay making an impressive debut over its first few months.

Both are buzzing all-day businesses in the tradition of European grand cafés, with varying Parisian and Viennese elements to the fore. So will the new restaurants follow this undoubtedly successful formula, especially given that RexRA had its fingers burnt when it ventured into somewhat alien territory with the ill-fated St Alban (see *St Alban* panel, opposite page)?

To a degree, but the team apparently also wants Brasserie Zédel to mark something of a departure, primarily in terms of accessibility. Long portrayed as celebrity restaurateurs, in the sense that all their restaurants attract a theatrical and media crowd, Corbin and King are keen to provide the more

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democratic environment of a genuine brasserie. As such, Brasserie Zédel aims to compete directly with high-street chains - targeting an average spend per head in the £20-£25 region for dinner, against The Wolseley's £40-£45.

It will offer classic brasserie staples such as a 'menu formule' of three courses, with water, wine and coffee for a set price, as well as sandwiches, snacks, salads and simple but substantial main dishes. Typical items might be celeriac remoulade, oysters and chicken liver mousse. If customers want to spend big, of course, they will still be given the opportunity. However, they may also be asked to share tables; at any rate, tables will be positioned extremely close together in true French style.

It will therefore be much more overtly French in feel than the existing businesses - or as one insider describes it, "almost xenophobically French" - taking its cues from the likes of La Coupole or Bouillon Chartier in Paris.

Brasserie Zédel's small ground-floor entrance area, opening onto Sherwood Street, will be converted into a café-tabac. The enormous subterranean space is split into three rooms: a jazz bar meets cabaret area; a cocktail bar (the old Dick's Bar from Atlantic days); and the huge main dining room. It will be open from lunch until late, eschewing the breakfast trade that is a fundamental part of The Wolseley's operation.

The company is working with David Collins Studio on the interior and with kitchen design consultancy SeftonHornWinch on the layout and equipment side. Both firms helped create The Delaunay and are also involved in the Sloane Square project.

Unlike The Wolseley and The Delaunay, the kitchen at Brasserie Zédel will be on the ground floor, adjacent to the 250-cover main room. But rather than use this to upgrade the menu to more gastronomic fare, the idea will be to use it for speed - turning tables so fast that they push towards a



Dizzying start: The Delaunay is a buzzing all-day business



Corner shop: the redevelopment that will be home to Brasserie Zédel

## Corbin and King: over 30 years and counting...

<p><b>Late 70s:</b></p> <p><b>Chris Corbin</b>, a manager at the famed Langan's Brasserie, and <b>Jeremy King</b>, manager of the equally high-profile Joe Allen's, meet and become friends</p>	<p><b>1981:</b></p> <p>The pair open <b>Le Caprice</b> in St James's, building a reputation for highly attentive service</p>	<p><b>1990:</b></p> <p>Corbin and King acquire <b>The Ivy</b> restaurant and set about restoring its fortunes, turning it into arguably London's most famous eaterie</p>	<p><b>1998:</b></p> <p>They open seafood restaurant <b>J Sheekey</b> off St Martin's Lane</p>	<p><b>1998:</b></p> <p>The duo sell their company, <b>Caprice Holdings</b>, to the Belgo group, led by Luke Johnson</p>	<p><b>2003:</b></p> <p>Their new company, Rex Restaurant Associates, opens <b>The Wolseley</b>, a European grand café on Piccadilly that is successful from the word go</p>	<p><b>2006:</b></p> <p><b>St Alban</b>, Rex's second restaurant, opens on Lower Regent Street, garnering mixed reviews (see <i>St Alban: the one that got away</i> on page 55)</p>	<p><b>2009:</b></p> <p>Corbin and King briefly help to revive the historic <b>Monkey Bar</b> in New York, acquired by <i>Vanity Fair</i> editor Graydon Carter</p>
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staggering 2,000 covers a day.

This certainly provides a challenge for Sefton Horn Winch, which has to manage the flow of every foodstuff - from arrival at the back door, into the kitchen, through various cooking processes, onto the plate, out to the dining room and back again - all at maximum efficiency. There will be no dumb waiters, which makes a huge difference in terms of speed and staffing, according to director Gareth Sefton.

Sefton cites RexRA's consistency in delivering good-quality food at high volumes as one of the company's core strengths - less celebrated than its fabled attention to detail on service, but no less crucial. Despite their extensive experience, Corbin and King also remain open to discussion and suggestion, and still know exactly what is going on within their restaurants.

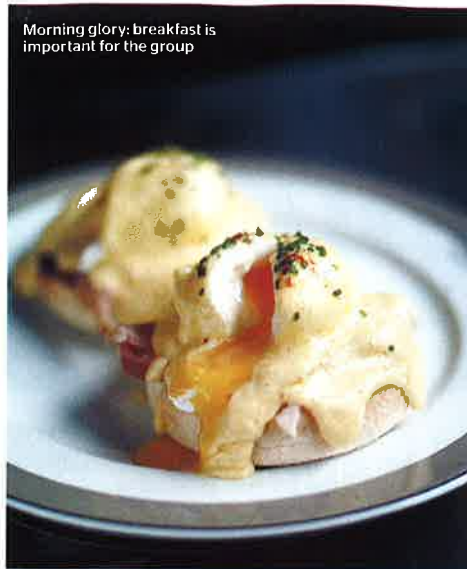
## New York sensibility

In contrast to Brasserie Zédel, Café Colbert in Sloane Square will not stray too far from the company's well-established upmarket café-restaurant model. It, too, will be more obviously French than its existing siblings but the menu will be pitched at similar price-points, albeit with a stronger emphasis on snacky items such as coffee, croissants and croques monsieur.

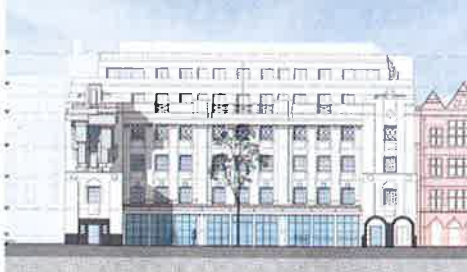
At 6,000sq ft and 120 covers, it is a significantly smaller operation - but with an expensive lease. That means it requires a consistent through-put of customers across all parts of the day to pay its way. It will be open from early until late, and aims to attract a high proportion of moneyed local clientele, whether for mid-week dinner, Saturday brunches or Sunday afternoon tea. As a result, its style will be a little less grand than the company's West End behemoths, a little more rough and ready (though in a decidedly Chelsea way).

The final piece in the RexRA jigsaw, as it currently stands, will be The Beaumont, a 73-room hotel on Balderton Street, just north of Grosvenor Square. The building's 1920s facade, which looks across the raised piazza of Brown Hart Gardens, will be retained while the rest of the building is being demolished and rebuilt.

It is envisaged as a 1920s Art Deco-style hotel influenced by the New York hotels of that era, with a dramatic two-height restaurant and glamorous bar, which will be designed by hotel specialist Richmond International. It will also house a major artwork by British sculptor Antony Gormley.



The Beaumont: the duo's first hotel



Despite having only two sites at present, RexRA is set up for growth, with the likes of managing director, service director, HR director and group executive chef all on board. By opting for variations on the café-brasserie theme, Corbin and King will continue to operate in a sphere where they are not only comfortable, but are the country's master practitioners. They are evidently also a pleasure to work for, with the majority of their senior team having stayed with them for many years.

The pair's longevity and personal charm (both are notorious for remembering names and details and still work the restaurant floor with effortless charm) means they also retain a huge amount of goodwill - both in the wider industry and among their customers.

More than the polished but personable service or the speedy, competent comfort food, the pair's secret ingredient is perhaps this: the spirit with which they imbue their restaurants. ■

## St Alban: the one that got away

In 2006, Rex Restaurants sought to follow up the extraordinary success of The Wolseley with its second restaurant, St Alban. Located on Lower Regent Street, the restaurant opened strongly. But just over three years later it closed.

So what caused Corbin and King to lose their apparently golden touch? Some pointed to the off-pitch location and the onset of the economic slowdown, but the protagonists have privately admitted that they got the décor, atmosphere and style of the restaurant - usually their key strengths - fundamentally wrong. St Alban was conceived in the style of a New York hotel-restaurant of the '50s or '60s. Light, spacious interiors, low-backed booth seating and a somewhat neutral colour palette created a space that was almost the antithesis of its previous, and indeed subsequent, restaurants.

The Mediterranean-led menu was overseen by head chef Francesco Mazzei, and represented



a shift to higher echelons of gastronomy. But the dining space was too spread out, lacking buzz. Perhaps most significantly in business terms, it was not a volume-driven operation in the same vein as The Wolseley but more of a considered dining destination.

Eventually, Corbin and King concluded that it would take too long to turn it around. At the time they anticipated they would need to focus their human and financial resources on the Theatre Museum project (a site they later lost to Richard Caring), and so made the painful decision to sell the lease and free up some cash. On its site now sits fusion restaurant Inamo.

### 2009:

Rex sells the **St Alban** lease and closes the restaurant in order to focus on the Theatre Museum site in Covent Garden

### 2010:

Rex is gazumped on the Theatre Museum site by restaurant mogul Richard Caring, who plans to open a London version of Keith McNally's Balthazar

### 2011:

The company opens **The Delaunay** - a café-restaurant with a central European bent - on the corner of Drury Lane and Aldwych

### January 2012:

**The Counter at The Delaunay** - a Viennese coffee shop and café with a takeaway element - opens alongside the restaurant

### June 2012:

**Brasserie Zédel**, located in the enormous former Atlantic Bar and Grill site just off Piccadilly Circus, is set to be unveiled

### September 2012:

Corbin and King will open **Café Colbert** in Chelsea's Sloane Square on the site of the former Oriel brasserie

### Early 2014:

**The Beaumont**, the pair's first hotel, is scheduled to open on Balderton Street, just north of Grosvenor Square