

Galvin

The Athenaeum, London

Words: Harry McKinley

“I always thought of the Athenaeum as the ‘odd ball’ of Mayfair”: Overheard words from a crowded table at Galvin, the hotel’s new restaurant. Uttered mid-starter, a throwaway phrase to be sure, but a surprisingly accurate one. For the Athenaeum was, and is, something of an oddity in this central and affluent part of London.

Just around the corner on Park Lane, the hotels are grand and imposing, the likes of The Dorchester and Four Seasons welcoming guests with impressive flower arrangements and lobbies of polished marble. In comparison The Athenaeum – one of the British capital’s few family run five-star hotels – seems a different breed. “We like to do things differently at The Athenaeum,” says General Manager Jeremy Hopkins. “We are stylish and glamorous, but without pretension.”

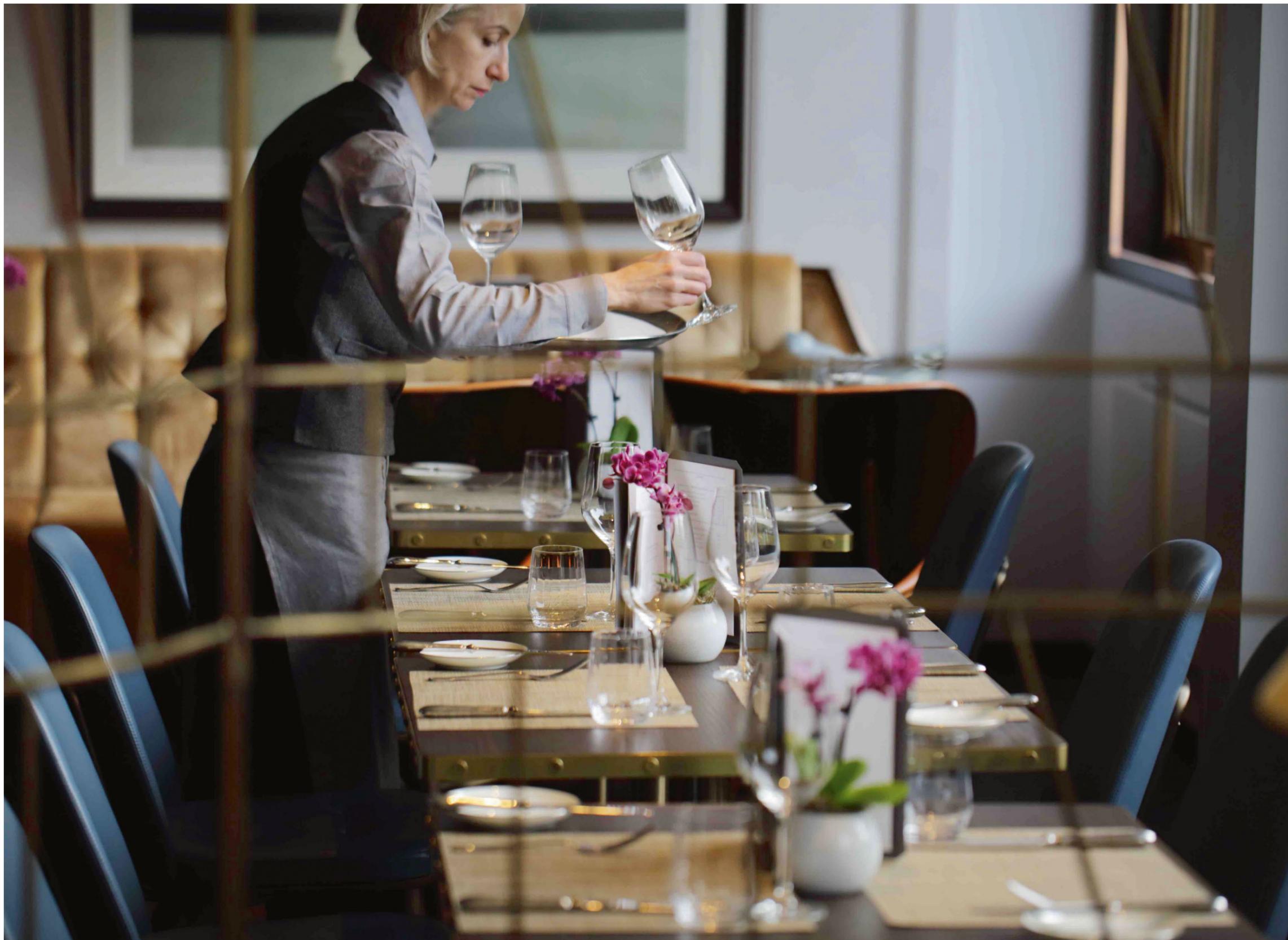
A permanent fixture in Mayfair since 1849, the hotel benefits from views of Green Park and a prime spot on Piccadilly. It has recently undergone a multi-million pound refurbishment, with a new double storey lobby and lounge, and a spruce-up of the rooms.

A portrait of Patsy Stone grabs the attention on entry. Uprturned bottle of Stolichnaya in hand, New York skyline in the background, she’s a fitting embodiment of the hotel; both glamorous, as Hopkins said, but also unashamedly rebellious. At the Athenaeum it wouldn’t feel shocking to glimpse her slinking out of the new bar, Eddie Monsoon in tow.

In the first partnership of its kind for the duo, the Galvin brothers are taking the helm on F&B throughout the hotel, from restaurant and bar to private dining and 24-hour room service. With a self-titled restaurant



Barnsley lamb chop



already in place nearby at the Hilton London Park Lane, and with experience at The Savoy, The Ritz, The Lanesborough and The Waldorf Caledonian Hotel in Edinburgh, the brothers are no strangers to the world of hotel F&B, but at The Athenaeum they have been given free rein to expand their concepts beyond the confines of the traditional bar and restaurant. “We wanted to bring a restaurant level of cuisine and service to all areas,” they say.

Kinnersley Kent Design was responsible for the newly remodelled and redesigned interiors, which blend Art Deco elements with crisp, understated modernity. An open lounge and lobby flows into a more formal seating area and further into Galvin. Parquet flooring runs throughout, with a gold frame partition providing the dividing line between relaxed and formal seating areas. A Kate Moss coffee table book lingers on a side table, resonating with Patsy on the wall.

The building’s façade has been opened up, with floor-to-ceiling windows pulling in light and affording views out onto the busy street beyond. A new terrace provides one of the few outdoor eating spaces on Piccadilly, with planters surrounding a relaxed seating area directly adjacent to the main entrance.

In this jigsaw of carefully arranged public spaces, only the new bar sits apart. Disconnected from the lobby by double doors, and accessible via its own private street entrance, it is a dark and ambient space where window booths swallow guests and a colour palette of deep greens and blues eats the light.

For the ‘ambience, style and vibe’ of The Bar, the Galvin brothers called on renowned bartender, brand owner and bar consultant Giancarlo Mancino. Like the rest of the hotel, the emphasis is on the unusual and the expression of personality. “It will be known for its signature cocktails, drawing on craft spirits and an impressive 160 brands,” says Mancino. “Don’t expect to see Campari, Bombay [Sapphire] or Gordon’s in here. The craft spirits and drinks will be showcased. Theatre will be a huge part of the bar experience and all drinks will be served in elegant, classic glassware which I have created specially to enhance the flavours.”

Signature cocktails include the Down Street Manhattan – from which smoke billows – and the Claypot Negroni. The bar itself is a striking single stretch of black marble commissioned by designers KKD.

Most defining of The Athenaeum’s new F&B offer, however, is the restaurant to which the Galvin brothers have attached their name. The 80-cover Galvin also draws upon the 1930s: a central glassware station embodying Streamline Moderne with its sweeping curves and sharp lines.

Whilst the design undoubtedly makes a bold statement, it is perhaps the cuisine that sees the most radical departure, as the Galvin Brothers steer away from their traditional French fare. Here the food is British, seasonal and market driven, using ingredients from regional farms. Speaking of the shift, Chris Galvin explains that the British identity of The Athenaeum made it an obvious choice. “We wanted to make sure it



was part of the concept,” he says. “For Galvin it was an exciting detour because we had just spent the last year developing dishes and ideas for our British pubs de luxe [HOP] and we have worked in our restaurants with a lot of great British suppliers for many years, so it was a natural coming together.”

In its menu Galvin showcases some of Chris and Jeff’s favourite dishes alongside new creations devised specially for The Athenaeum. And on the issue of ‘Britishness’ it’s fair the brothers went full kilter. A grilled Herdwick Barnsley lamb chop sits in the mains alongside belly of Dingley Dell pork, Rose Country beef rib eye and Goosnargh chicken breast. There are Isle of Wight heritage tomatoes, Cornish sardines, Dorset scallops and English strawberries.

As is increasingly expected, waiters and waitresses are well briefed on the offer and supply details on the provenance of key ingredients, recipes and cooking methods. Wisely, explanation is kept to a comfortable and engaging level. As Michael Ellis, International Director of the Michelin Guides opined during a recent conversation, “Diners want to know where produce has come from, but they’re not always keen to know the name of the farmer or the process of farming. That kind of information overload is ultimately a distraction.”

Table arrangements are classic and simple, with white plates and

dishes supplied by Goodfellow. Cutlery is from Arthur Price, whilst glassware is provided by Urban Bar.

For its wine selection Galvin utilises the Loeb on Tap system – from O.W. Loeb wine merchants – where fine wines are delivered and stored in state-of-the-art pressurised kegs. Not only does the practice ensure that vintages are kept fresh, but it also allows for wines to be offered by the glass without the need to open a full bottle, reducing waste and keeping the quality level consistently high for the guest.

Whilst the Galvin brothers are steering the F&B for The Athenaeum as whole, it is through Galvin the restaurant that they are most directly communicating their concept and ethos to a broad audience of both staying guests and locals. And in this regard they have the same aspiration as most modern restaurateurs, and indeed hoteliers: to create a neighbourhood destination. As Jeff Galvin says, “We like to think of Galvin as a cool place to meet and dine, that has consistent, excellent cuisine and diverse choice. We love the location, which has seen a much-increased footfall over the last few years. Our ambition is that it becomes a must-visit for the area and a much loved regular destination for breakfast, lunch, dinner and all of the times in between.”

www.athenaeumhotel.com

IN A BITE Covers: 80 • Executive Chefs: Chris and Jeff Galvin • Head Bartender: Michael Ball • Consultant (The Bar): Giancarlo Mancino • Interior Design: Kinnersley Kent Design • Owner: Ralph Trustees • Operator (F&B): Galvin Restaurants • Tableware: Goodfellow (supplier) • Glassware: Urban Bar • Cutlery: Arthur Price • Key alcohol brands (The Bar): Mancino Vermouth, Pyrat XO, Konik’s Tail, Bathtub Gin, Dodd’s Gin, St. George Terroir Gin, Glenlivet 1948, Macallan 25 Year