

# Top of the food chain

Mayfair is home to some of London's most opulent restaurants – and it has the property prices to match.

By *Natalie Whittle*

The “Sackville” burger on the plate in front of me costs £38. A darkly glazed brioche bun sandwiches the prize ingredients that supposedly justify the price: two flame-grilled slices of Wagyu beef, from Japan's prestige cattle herds, underneath a thick slice of seared foie gras. On each cut-side of the bun is a heavy smearing of truffle butter, with the whole calorific edifice topped by a sliver of black truffle. The fries, too, are grated with truffle. Indeed, every single dish on the menu at Sackville's, Mayfair, involves the expensive tuber.

Indulgence like this does not come cheap anywhere, but in Mayfair, where Sackville's opened this summer, it is expected. Restaurants here play a game of glamour, creating gilded theatres in which the diners are the players. At Richard Caring's newly opened Sexy Fish, a glowing atrium of amber lights and pink leather banquettes, the chefs in the open kitchen call out the orders with caveats such as “VIP”, or “very VIP”, (everyone from Kate Moss to Lewis Hamilton has been spotted) and plates of buttery lobster and fine sushi are swirled about the room under the waving Matisse-like fronds of the ceiling mural. (The name Sexy Fish, too, is such a pointed oxymoron, one wonders if Caring himself isn't poking fun at Mayfair's peculiar school of fish, rich enough to buy any epithet, including sexy.)

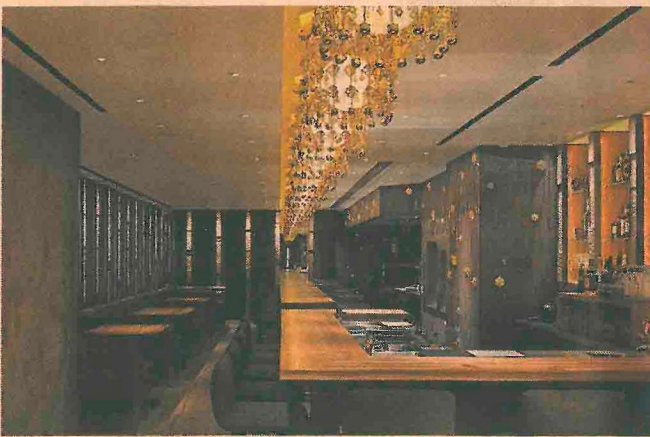
It may be fun and convenient for those who live within walking distance of these places (Mayfair is pedestrian in one sense at least), and it appears lucrative. Yet industry insiders speculate over whether smaller fry than Caring are actually making any money. This, in an area where property prices hover at about £2,500 per sq ft, according to Savills, and rents are also high.

Darren Selby, general manager of Langan's Brasserie, started working at the Mayfair institution 21 years ago as a barman. At that time, he says, Mayfair was “busy and late”, and Langan's, which opened in 1976, did a roaring post-theatre trade. Its red-neon script is now a nostalgic sight opposite Green Park Tube station, as the brasserie faces “great competition from the area around the Shard” and is undergoing a complex change of ownership. “If you look across from Langan's, Timpson [the cobbler] is the only shop that hasn't changed.” Yet Selby says the “beauty of Langan's is people came for their 18th birthday and they come back for their 40th – we imbue a homely feel”.

For customers to celebrate birthdays at such great intervals in Mayfair's new restaurants, the operators will need to withstand the eye-watering costs associated with this postcode. “Property prices are very high and have a direct impact on rents,” says Alan Yau, who has just opened his opulent dinner-dance venue, Park Chinois, on Berkeley Street. “You cannot just allow the market to dictate the terms of a community like Mayfair; I think large private landowners should keep a few retail spaces [at more affordable rates].” Yau adds that he would love to see Mayfair become “a proper village”, and to see “a larger number of independents running key social amenities . . . it'd be



A stretch limousine outside Langan's Brasserie in Mayfair — Nicholas Bailey/Rex Features



Tokimeite, a Japanese restaurant serving Wagyu beef — Nacasa & Partners Inc



Four-bedroom house near Berkeley Square, £25m



Four-bed penthouse close to Tokimeite, £5m

nice to have an independent fishmonger and grocery. You can't really call Hedonism [the upmarket wine merchant] an off-licence.”

Peter Wetherell, founder of Mayfair estate agents Wetherell, says one problem might be that “we don't have the education system in Mayfair”. Yet even without a school, the profile of the area's residents, who number about 5,100, is getting younger, with 42 per cent aged 25 to 44, according to the 2011 Census, up from 33 per cent in 2001.

Sexy Fish is overseen by Laura Montana, operations director for new projects at Richard Caring's Caprice



Four-bed house near Langan's, £15m



Sexy Fish, Richard Caring's new restaurant in Mayfair — Mark Brunell

Holdings. “In Mayfair,” she says, “you can get anything, from toast and Marmite from a small, independently run café [bread and butter is £1.90 at Le Petit Café on Stafford Street], to caviar & Krug from one of the more exclusive Mayfair establishments [at Novikov, from £150 per 50g and from £350 a bottle], with everything in between. There is a surprisingly large number of residents who use our restaurants and [Mount Street] deli as their regular haunts; they're on first-name, friendly terms with our staff.”

Although the rents and premiums are tough (Caring is rumoured to have spent £15m on Sexy Fish), Yau says that “compared to how we operate and behave in the likes of Soho and so on, I find Mayfair to be easier. It's partially to do with the product itself . . . if you have something truly amazing, it's not about competition but how you're able to enjoy the repeat custom of customers, rather than having to compete with the competition.”

Selby echoes this sentiment. “All good restaurants don't worry about another good one coming in. We don't compete with Novikov,” he says.

William Bax, director of placemaking at Grosvenor and chairman of the Mayfair Forum, says: “We've seen more [restaurant] openings in the past two or three years than we've probably ever done . . . The demand [for sites] is coming from a very broad spectrum, many are established British chefs.”

Mayfair, he says, is becoming “ever more cosmopolitan in terms of its international flavour. It strikes me that demand is equally attractive to a new restaurant whether or not you're British, French, Russian or Chinese owned. The interesting test for me is that we're fairly close to the tipping

point; the West End can support its current leisure offer, but I wonder how much more is sustainable. Oversupply creates a different character, and one should consider the impact it has on local people. The role of Westminster and estates like Grosvenor is [to ensure] the balance is met, that we don't create a restaurant theme park.”

Yolanda Barnes, director of world research at Savills, notes that there is a particular “live, work, play and visit” population in Mayfair and “the good

news is that Mayfair will always be different as a result of that”.

“Mayfair started to change when the temporary office consents that were granted after the second world war started not to be renewed by Westminster council; a whole slew of offices were reverted to residential,” she says. “Grosvenor picked up on that and decided to make it a residential enclave. It wasn't as prime as the Belgravia estate; the whole thing has burgeoned.”

It is hard now to imagine Mayfair as a place that Wetherell remembers as “racy”, though, of course, it still has its casinos.

One of the problems, suggests Barnes, is that Mayfair is not controlled by one dominant estate, but a complex parceling of owners. “Large parts of it aren't in the hands of a large landed estate. Mount Street has kept the butchers and fine art and designer boutique-type



Drama nightclub on Park Lane

shops, but that's been actively managed by the Grosvenor.”

Among the newcomers is Tokimeite, on Conduit Street, the first London restaurant of Zen-Noh Group, the business arm of JA, which is Japan's largest agricultural co-operative. Tokimeite is capitalising on the new trade (opened up last year) in Wagyu beef exports to the EU. Zen-Noh has also opened a London office to promote the co-op's beef.

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## WHAT YOU CAN BUY . . .

**£5m** A four-bedroom duplex penthouse in a red-brick building, a short walk from Tokimeite restaurant and Regent Street. Available through CBRE

**£15m** A Grade II-listed townhouse with four bedrooms, four bathrooms and three reception rooms arranged over six floors, plus a garden. The property is close to Langan's Brasserie and Green Park Tube station. Available through Knight Frank

**£25m** A newly built, four-bedroom family home, just west of the restaurants on Berkeley Square, with an indoor pool, media room and roof terrace. Available through Wetherell

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