

# One Leicester Street: a destination reborn



Far left: exterior of the Georgian building. Left: one of the hotel's double rooms

**L**ANGOUSTE, huitres, moules": the vintage sign splashed over the façade of One Leicester Street gives some clue as to the heritage of this Georgian building situated on edge of Chinatown in the seedy glare of Leicester Square. The hotel, restaurant and bar has just begun a new chapter in its 300 years of hostelry. Reeling from financial fallout and rescued by a dynamic hotelier, it's all set to give Londoners a rollicking good time again.

My guest and I walk into the low-lit, intimate dining room. He has been here before; not in its previous incarnation as Fergus Henderson's short-lived St John Hotel Chinatown, but back in the day when it was fish and seafood restaurant Manzi's. He was celebrating a school friend's 18th birthday with a trip "up West" – a meal and a show. Wiping their plates clean, his friend's mum advised him: "You know, this is a very good place to bring a girl on a date. If it goes well, they have rooms upstairs."

Twenty-two years later, it is still a "restaurant with rooms". The Italian-owned Manzi's had run its course by 2007, and any vestiges of post-war Soho were swept aside (apart from the evocative signage) by the godfather of nose-to-tail eating, Fergus Henderson and his long-term business partner, Trevor Gulliver. Henderson, who started his working life as an architect before teaching himself the art of cooking, had a vision, which swung into action just

## It made a splash on the restaurant scene as St John in Chinatown but failed after barely a year. Revived as One Leicester Street, Laura Ivill talks to the team behind this iconic destination.

before the downturn. The timing couldn't have been worse and his problems were compounded by a renovation that ended up being delayed. They finally opened in 2011 and his head chef, Tom Harris, won a Michelin star.

A phone call to the Singaporean hotelier and restaurateur, Loh Lik Peng saved everyone's bacon. Loh has built a successful portfolio of hotels and restaurants across Singapore, Shanghai and London, and is the brains behind the architecturally cool Bethnal Green Town Hall Hotel and Apartments where Viajante has a Michelin star. Difficult neighbourhoods have never deterred Loh; they have been the making of him. A lawyer aged 29, he bought into the red light area of Singapore's Chinatown when property was rock bottom during the crisis in Asia of the late Nineties. "I thought Singapore needed a cool boutique hotel and there was none," he says. "I was very successful and never looked back."

"We've known each other for quite a few years," Loh says of his friendship with Henderson and Gulliver. "The intention [of taking

over the business] was to make sure that the team there was well protected. There had been a lot of time and effort spent building them up, and some of the guys had worked for St John for many, many years. When Trevor contacted me it was with that in mind. We didn't let anyone go."

As the St John brand was dismantled, Loh looked to establish a new atmosphere inspired by Tom Harris's very British menu. Harris's food had been a hit, but prices were too high and the decor needed to change. "The restaurant was perceived to be too cold and that was a St John signature; very white, very sparse, bare bulbs, very austere. So we set about giving the restaurant a bit more warmth, to reflect a bit a kind of English character, intimate and warm," Loh says.

The historic nature of the property fitted with his portfolio. "It's been a hotel for 300 years. Heritage buildings have lots of character – those are really the only kind of projects we work on. I love the whole restoration part of that. It's my favourite part."

Muted colours wash through the

46-cover restaurant and reception on the ground floor. Painted walls, tongue-and-groove, plain carpets and bare bulbs with copper mini-shades, create a simple, familiar feel throughout. The only decorations are pretty vases of big blooms, bought and arranged every Thursday by Tom Harris's wife.

The lounge bar serves an original menu of inventive, dry cocktails for under £10. Work your way through the list sitting in low modern-retro chairs surrounded by distinctive dark teal paintwork and splashes of hot-yellow furnishings. Upstairs the rooms are white, bright and airy, simply furnished so that your own things casually thrown – coat, bag, shoes, laptop – make it seem like your space, even for a night.

With just the restaurant, bar, 14 rooms and one suite, the property is intimate enough to feel relaxed and homely. That's deliberate: "I'm here an awful lot," Harris says. Keeping the old team together hasn't been easy. They may have "been through hell and high water" but all have come out smiling.

The menu encourages informal sharing and chatting. Dishes are

listed by type – shellfish/fish, meat/offals, vegetables, cheese, puddings – rather than the traditional starter, main and desert. "It's about you asking questions and the waiters being well-informed, friendly and warm," Harris says. "This brings the room alive. There's nothing like being in the kitchen when it's alive, when you have happy staff."

The dining experience is theatre with Harris taking centre stage in the open kitchen. So should it be "Tom Harris at One Leicester Street"? "I give my chefs a lot of autonomy," Loh says, "and Tom's a partner in the project so the name and who he chose to work with I pretty much left up to him."

"There is the cult of the chef nowadays," Harris concedes. "It's a lot of nonsense. It's not about my name above the door. This is an iconic building. It's about people having a good time and leaving happy."

However, if you do take a date, don't leave booking a room to chance. The word is out and rooms are busy. You might end up at the W hotel opposite. And that really does belong to Leicester Square.

*One Leicester Street: doubles at £195 post-supper room, £220 superior room, £350 the suite (020-3501 8020, oneleicesterstreet.com). Dinner for two with wine and service around £115.*

## Avoid making mistakes when choosing between bidders with these top tips



**Q** I HAVE had a lot of interest in my flat but I'm not sure how best to pick between the 6 bidders.

**A** WHILE that's a nice problem to have, it's easy to get it wrong. It's important not to accept

every thing at face value. Set a time for the best bids and make it clear that you won't necessarily accept the highest one. Set the date for the end of a week like Friday at noon, so buyers have a chance to cogitate over the weekend.

Ask them to supply a letter from their solicitor stating they're

instructed. Also, ask for exact details of their money situation: if cash, a letter from a bank manager or bank statement is a prerequisite but if a mortgage is required, ask for an exact deposit amount and at least a letter from a mortgage company or broker stating that they have an offer in place.

The bidders must also state exactly what chains they are in and whether or not the purchase is dependent on selling another property. As an extra bulwark, ask for copies of all bids to be sent to your solicitors. This will help give your buyers piece of mind. Be prepared to accept a lower bid if it's all cash.