

Club CLASS

The secrets to an unforgettable dining experience? Personality, a sense of belonging, and beautiful tableware. Amy Broomfield talks to the man behind The Wolseley, Jeremy King



Henriettes David Loftus/Portrait, Oct Garcia



Above Restaurateur Jeremy King envisioned The Wolseley as London's first Viennese-style 'grand café'



Recalling the day he first laid eyes on the space, an erstwhile branch of Barclays bank in Piccadilly, London, he says, "When I walked in here in 2003, I was sceptical about the opportunity." The restaurateur, who is tall and dressed immaculately in a black pinstriped three-piece, speaks earnestly in a way that sounds considered yet unrehearsed. "I was worried. I'd seen banking halls turned into restaurants before; the results were often without any character. But despite the fact that it had brown ceilings, palm trees and lots of red everywhere, I thought it could be special. And then Chris said, 'This is the grand café you've always dreamed of.'"

King had been on the hunt for a venue with such promise for a while. His long-time goal had been to create a Viennese-style café-cum-brasserie, which didn't exist in London at the time. It was to be a formally informal place where you could relax and sip a coffee next to someone eating steak frites next to someone else enjoying a full afternoon tea, and not feel out of place – but still feel special. "To me, the great restaurants are those that

It's mid-morning at The Wolseley, and there's a distinct buzz in the air. High above the genial mix of diners – everyone from tourists to business types, couples on dates to solo regulars on first-name terms with the staff – the sound of talking and laughing reverberates around the room like a non-imposing soundtrack. Seated in the far-right corner, in one of the best spots for people-watching and admiring the restaurant's grandeur, is co-founder Jeremy King.

In front of him is an Art Deco-style silver teapot and a silver-plated tea strainer designed to swivel and balance on your cup before resting above a dripping bowl. The Wolseley's tableware has proved so popular with customers that King and the head of retail, his wife, Lauren Gurvich King, eventually developed a retail collection. King picks up the strainer and admires it. "Of course we could have invented a much simpler tea strainer," he says. "But there's a little frisson of enjoyment using ours. The moment you figure it out, it's like you belong to a club."

It should come as no surprise that every detail at The Wolseley is as considered as that little strainer. This is, after all, King's area of expertise. It's down to him and his business partner Chris Corbin that The Wolseley has become such a stalwart of the British dining scene.

"To me, the great restaurants are those that enable everyone to make of them what they want"

enable everyone to make of them what they want," he explains. "We dine out for different reasons – a date, a reunion, a job interview, seduction, divorce. A great restaurant will facilitate all of those things."

Originally constructed for Wolseley Motors Limited in 1921, the Grade II-listed building was a car showroom before Barclays took over in 1926, installing the horseshoe bankers' counter that remains to this day. Just before King acquired the site, it had a brief spell as a Chinese restaurant. Yet despite its various incarnations, the space is as impressive as ever, with a nine-domed ceiling and many of its original fixtures intact, including the elaborate bronze chandeliers, marble pillars and Japanese lacquer wall panels. >

Top right THE WOLSELEY COLLECTION silver-plated mini teapot £179 and tea strainer £55; **opposite page** THE WOLSELEY COLLECTION crystal tumblers £185 for six



High above the entrance on either side is a private dining room with beautiful half-moon windows overlooking the floor, as does a Juliet balcony opposite. But perhaps the most recognisable (and, presumably, the most Instagrammed) element of décor is the original geometric monochrome tiling across the floor, which lends an appropriately glamorous Art Deco elegance to the venue.

That people come to admire the building itself is typical of the kinds of places King invests in. His and Corbin's string of restaurants includes The Delaunay in Covent Garden and Brasserie Zédel in Soho, and their success, he says, is very much down to creating a memorable dining experience. "There is a great crisis in restaurants at the moment whereby restaurateurs don't own the buildings anymore and instead have a long lease," he explains. "That's why you get so many places with plain white linens, white walls and terrible acoustics." King and Corbin have always sought to own their venues, and work with investors from hotel and catering backgrounds who inherently understand that they are building restaurants for the future.

Beyond ownership and individuality, there's the experiential element of a restaurant – and King takes this incredibly seriously. "We work really hard on getting to know what our customers



like," he says. "The irony is that despite technology aids designed to make this all easier, restaurants are doing it less and less. At Zédel, for example, we use linen napkins over paper, but we let customers know that they might shed a bit, so we offer them a black napkin for their black suits." As if on cue, an elegant lady takes a seat to our left; she says little, but in minutes a pot of tea arrives on a silver platter. It's obvious that the staff know her well. King says, "People often ask me, 'Why don't you put a sign up for the loos?' And I say, 'Because you only have to ask once.' Once you know, you come here with that little bit of extra confidence. It's all about belonging."

Then there are the details diners may not even realise are elevating their experience. The wine glasses, for example; "The sheerer the rim, the easier it is to enjoy the wine," says King, who had the designs based on a favourite he bought for his own home. "The worst are Paris goblets – they have a big thick horrible rim, but they last forever, which is why so many restaurants use them. A glass should feel good, in the same way there's a good weight to a proper silver knife and fork." Many of these pieces are now available to buy so customers can enjoy a little piece of The Wolseley in their own homes. Key designs include vintage silver-plated ice buckets, fine-bone china coffee mugs that echo the design of the floor tiles, and a range of 1920s-style glassware, including a set of 22-carat gold tumblers and crystal coupes ideal for gimlets.

"It's like what [restaurant critic] Fay Maschler once said of The Delaunay," King says. "She said, 'I love the evolution of new restaurants, but sometimes after sitting on a rickety stool and drinking out of a reconstituted jam jar, it's nice to have a bit of comfort with good linen and glassware.' And that's exactly what we do." □

Above Originally a car showroom, the building still boasts many original features from the 1920s, including vaulted ceilings, marble pillars and geometric monochrome tiling



Left THE WOLSELEY COLLECTION crystal coupes £175 for six Entertaining at Home, Second Floor