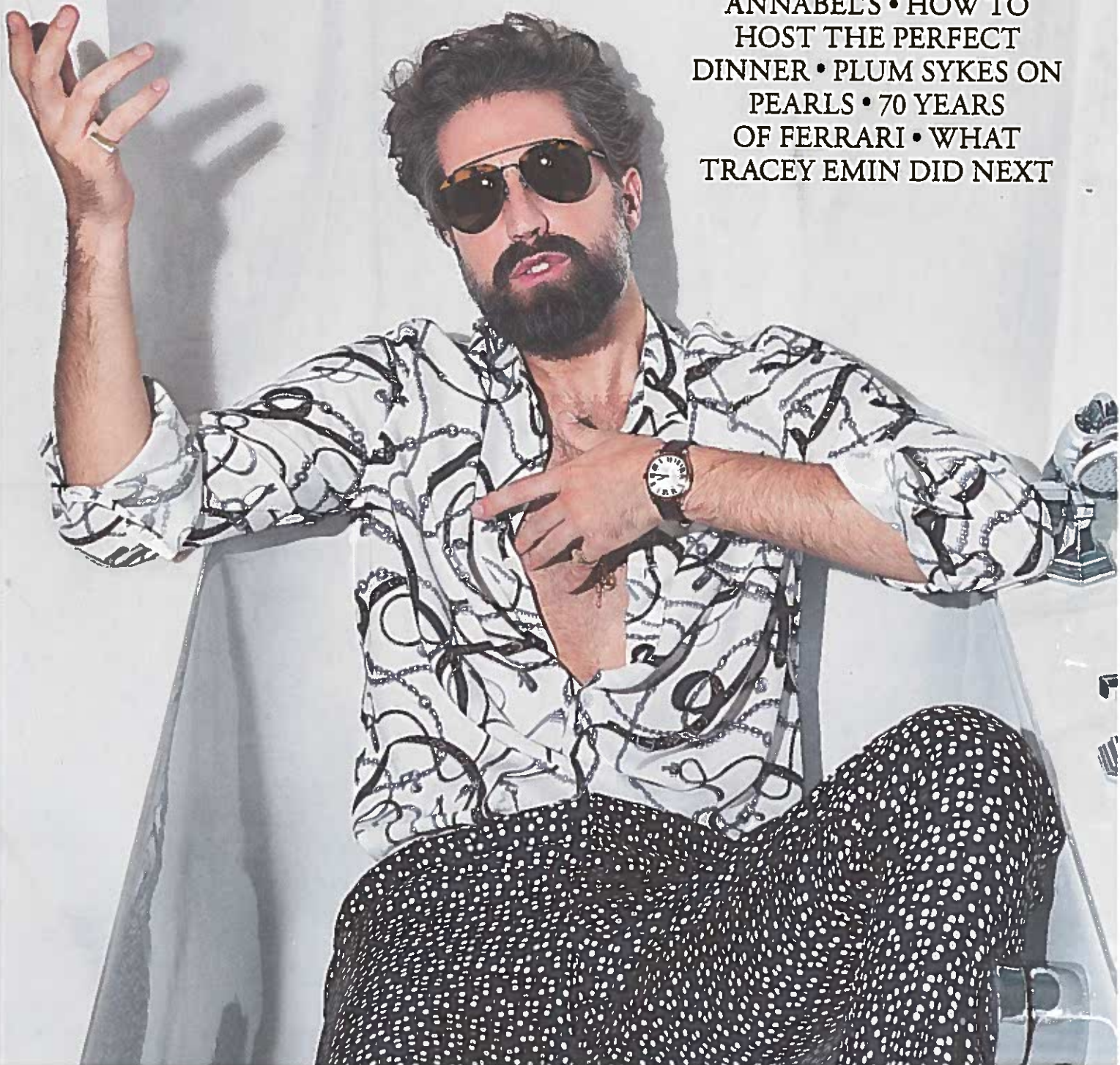


CLARIDGE'S • THE CONNAUGHT • THE BERKELEY
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The Party
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A matter of taste

WITH CHIC LIGHTING, ILLUSTRATED MENUS AND EVEN A TAKEAWAY PIZZA, JEAN-GEORGES VONGERICHTEN IS RESTORING A LIGHT-HEARTED TOUCH TO MAYFAIR DINING, SAYS **BILL PRINCE**

With the opening of Jean-Georges at The Connaught, Jean-Georges Vongerichten is returning to his professional roots. But he's never really been away. Via his last authored dining space in London – Vong, at The Berkeley – the Alsace-born chef revolutionised the culinary landscape to lasting effect.

Before Vong opened in 1996, 'Asian fusion' had barely been heard of, much less adopted as *the* contemporary cuisine for any restaurateur wishing to appeal to a growing army of globalistas making London their home-from-home. Yet within a scant six years, Vong spearheaded a vogue for Asian-inspired – or simply fusion-friendly – menus, from Nobu to Zuma, Roka to Sexy Fish.

Fast-forward to 2017 and it seems Jean-Georges' stamp can be found on half of the capital's preferred kitchens. But the chef has chosen to renew his career-long connection with the city (he first visited in 1985, assisting the legendary Louis Outhier on Park Lane) by adopting a fresh approach at his new home overlooking Carlos Place.

Jean-Georges at The Connaught, which opened in the summer, is in step with a town that's learned to relax and enjoy what a restaurant can – and should – be. Vongerichten's first all-day offering is complemented by a stunning design that enhances its day-to-night allure. Interior designer John Heah's mood board might well have read 'sociable, convivial, accessible', such is the emphasis on craftsmanship and original artworks; a piece by the late sculptor Louise Bourgeois and a creation by Irish painter and printmaker Sean Scully greet diners as they enter.

But the room's attributes run deeper. By day it's filled with light, thanks to floor-to-ceiling windows topped with stained glass by French artist Jean-Michel Othoniel. By night it's intimate, thanks to low-slung furniture that aids sightlines across what will inevitably be a well-populated room.

From a diner's perspective, the space offers myriad possibilities: a friends and family moment around a large, marble-topped table; an *à deux* secreted beneath the Scully; a simple 'hi and bye' coffee stop at a posing table by the bar.

Alongside the tried-and-tested full English, breakfast offers an array of fresh alternatives, including émigrés from Vongerichten's healthy-eating New York outposts ABC Kitchen and ABCV. Lunch and dinner offer a similarly satisfying mélange of local favourites: alongside fish 'n' chips and Cornish lamb chops are a few of Jean-Georges' greatest hits, including his signature crispy salmon sushi, and egg toast with caviar.

There's a free-spirited yet accomplished theme throughout, exemplified by menus illustrated with winning whimsy by French graphic designer Jean Jullien. Afternoon tea makes a welcome return to this corner of the hotel – once a drawing room that provided a peaceful retreat from the bustle beyond – while evening diners can enjoy a further twist on Vongerichten's repertoire: a 'takeaway' truffle pizza (in its own Jean Jullien-designed box).

This innovation speaks to an earlier era when hotel regulars might receive the



“It's in step with a town that's learned to relax and enjoy what a restaurant can be”



From top: table at Jean-Georges at The Connaught; crushed peas and mint on toast; crispy salmon sushi; illustration by Jean Jullien; the view over Carlos Place

occasional hot supper, delivered to their nearby home or office.

Vongerichten's pizza-to-go service is the latest iteration of a sense of civility and service that dates back to the founding of The Coburg, the hotel that once occupied the site on which The Connaught stands. The Coburg was founded by French chef Alexander Grillon, who relocated his club and dining rooms from nearby Bond Street (on a site now occupied by Cartier) at the beginning of the 19th century. Another French chef, Auguste Scorrer, took over the lease on The Coburg, but didn't live to see its redevelopment as The Connaught in 1917.

At the time, a clause in the property's lease forbade a bar, which only added to its reputation for focusing on food. The Connaught became rightly revered for its cuisine, overseen by internationally-renowned chefs. Each added his, and latterly her, personal touches to its menus.

But times change, and the prospects of 'crêpes de volaille Connaught' and 'sole Carlos' no longer hold quite the same allure as they did in the days of Daniel Dunas or Michel Bourdin, who between them commanded The Connaught's kitchens for almost 50 years. Instead we come to avail ourselves of what a globally recognised chef can bring to a destination dining room. In Jean-Georges' case, that is a career spent combining his French sensibility with the explorative edge of a true culinary pioneer. With the brilliant summation of those influences at Jean-Georges at The Connaught, Vongerichten has triumphantly rejoined London's roll call of legendary chefs. **M**

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