



WHO RULES THE NIGHT?

**Richard
Caring**



**Marco
Pierre
White**



Mark Birley



Robin Birley



**Arkady
Novikov**



Graydon Carter



Philip Green



Jeremy King

Two names dominate London's café society: Showy Richard Caring operates his acquisitions (the Ivy, Le Caprice) like a business tycoon, whereas demure Jeremy King oversees his properties (the Wolseley, Colony Grill Room) with a restaurateur's eye. **Michael Gross investigates the fierce battle to seat the city's Who's Who.**

Chris Corbin

Illustration by Jimmy Turrell

Peter Langton

Michael Caine

Keith McNally

Gordon Ramsay

Think of London and inevitably you think of the stage. Yet the play's not the *only* thing anymore. Now in a city where cuisine was long ago an afterthought—if it was thought about at all—restaurants are the hottest tickets in town.

Generating the most heat of all are two leading men, Richard Caring and Jeremy King, who sit atop two competing dining empires, Caprice Holdings and Corbin & King, respectively.

Caring, 67, who is compact and tightly wound, with remarkable bouffant hair, bright white teeth, and an unlined face, and the tall, suave, twinkly eyed and bearded King, 61, may be visual opposites, but they have much in common, notably sovereignty over restaurants favored by the see-and-be-seen set. But Caring, King (along with his longtime business partner, Chris Corbin), and their individual crowds are as different as traditional London is from the international cosmopolis it has become. Caring caters to the brash new London, the wealthy arrivistes from elsewhere who've made it Europe's worldliest city, while King seems dedicated to reminding patrons of what's made London so magnetic for eons.

Think of London and you also think of civility, even when, just beneath the surface, feelings are anything but civil. A deeper look reveals this as a war between London's superstar mealmongers. "In the red corner, the dyed-in-the-wool, old-fashioned restaurateur King, versus, in the blue corner, the relative newcomer, heavyweight businessman Richard Caring," announces Ben Elliot, who is something of a ringmaster as the cofounder of the international concierge service Quintessentially. "The stakes are high in the 21st-century culinary capital of the world," Elliot continues.

The winner will no less than rule the night.

Caring's and King's restaurants have distinct identities. All offer world-class dinner theater, beginning with a tangible sense of arrival—what Englishman-in-New-York Keith McNally, Caring's partner in a London branch of the Balthazar brasserie, has described as "a blast of energy" on walking in the door, the buzzy feeling that you're about to get much more than a meal. Good food is only part of it.

Mere mortals book tables long in advance or at awkward hours, they pull strings or rank (pulling out cash doesn't work) or take a chance and just show up, hoping to get lucky and score a table, particularly at the top-tier rooms like Caring's Le Caprice, Scott's, and the Ivy, or Corbin & King's most electric room, the Wolseley. Then, there's the question of where you're seated: in the center of the con-

centric rings of the Wolseley? The front room of Le Caprice? Find yourself there and you've been cast as a leading player, blessed by the psychic spotlight that shines on those tables and sight lines that let you see the rest: Isn't that Woody Allen and Soon-Yi Previn tucked into the corner banquette at Le Caprice? Jeffrey Archer at the Delaunay? Kate Moss at the Wolseley? Photographer Terry O'Neill, wearing battered sneakers and all black, entertaining a pair of Yanks at Scott's? But there are no Playbills here, and the hovering, attentive staff have been sworn to silence about the cast. "It's like a club," says Jose Torres, who has worked at Le Caprice for 17 years. "We know where they like to sit, what they like to drink." And what not to say about them.

Between them, Caprice Holdings and Corbin & King run 18 of London's most desirable restaurants, as well as private clubs, a catering service, and a brand-new hotel, the Beaumont. They include the modern Le Caprice off Piccadilly, lined with classic David Bailey photos; the dark and cozy West End landmarks the Ivy and J. Sheekey; grandly theatrical rooms like the Wolseley and Brasserie Zédel; the opulent seafood palace Scott's; masculine chophouses like the Ralph Lauren-esque Colony Grill Room and sleek 34; neighborhood hangouts like the French-style café Colbert on Sloane Square and a Viennese equivalent, Fischer's, on Marylebone High Street; and a classic ladies-who-lunch spot on the King's Road, the Ivy Chelsea Garden. Though all rise to the occasion, Michelin-starred meals are generally not the point; fish and chips with mushy peas are on many if not most of the menus. These dining rooms are all about the vibe.

Chris [Corbin] and I have always believed in things subliminal," says Jeremy King, who has opened their six current restaurants. When creating new places, King (the active partner) invents stories for each, then designs them like sets for their imagined scenarios. So the Delaunay—in King's fiction, the slowly expanded creation of two brothers escaping pogroms in middle Europe, and named, like the Wolseley, for an old auto brand—is a grand European-style café-restaurant, with old-wood-and-brass decor and a menu boasting *Würstchen* and schnitzel, Sacher torte, and Bavarian blue cheese. The Beaumont hotel and its hypermasculine Art Deco-ish Colony Grill Room are inspired by Sherman Billingsley's Stork Club and are the

ostensible creation of a fictional character, Jimmy Beaumont, an expatriate hotelier from Prohibition-era New York. Brasserie Zédel, more a complex than a restaurant—complete with a sidewalk café, a thimble-sized cabaret, and a grand underground dining salon—is a take on the real-life Bouillien Chartier, in Paris, where the room is as big as the prices are gentle, “both a special treat for a student and a canteen for the affluent,” says King, “where a taxi driver can sit down with a duchess.”

Corbin & King’s Fischer’s is similarly modeled on a Viennese *Konditorei*, or pastry shop. But it’s the requisite backstory of their latest place, Colbert, that really takes the cake. Located on Sloane Square, its imagined owner, Pierre, seduced the daughter of his boss in a Paris café, and then fled to London where, impecunious, he built one of his own, room by room, leaving the paneling endearingly inconsistent. The attention to detail is as tasty as the classic crustaceans, confit, and cassoulet Colbert serves. But imaginative as he is, King could have never conceived of the story of how he and his competitor Caring became the clashing kings of London cuisine.

In 1917 Abel Giandellini bought an unlicensed café in London’s West End and hired Mario Gallati as its maître d’. The Ivy’s name came later, from one of the thespians who loved its inexpensive food and who told Giandellini his clients would cling to him like ivy. In 1947, Gallati opened Le Caprice, near the Ritz on Piccadilly, and it elbowd the Ivy into irrelevance, attracting the likes of Noël Coward, Laurence Olivier, and Vivien Leigh. By the 1970s, Le Caprice had faded, too. At the same time, Chris Corbin was managing hotspot Langan’s Brasserie, co-owned by Irish restaurateur Peter Langan and the actor Michael Caine. Jeremy King held Corbin’s same title at the London outpost of the Broadway -actor hangout Joe Allen’s. The two West Country boys became friends when Peter Langan tried to hire King.

In 1980, Moroccan-born Joseph Ettedgui, namesake of the Joseph fashion brand, approached Corbin to open a restaurant, and he insisted King be involved. They settled on the moribund Caprice, and Ettedgui leased it but soon fought with his partners over its new decor. After it reopened and immediately started losing money, Ettedgui issued an ultimatum: They had three weeks to buy him out. King’s parents used their home as collateral for a loan to help them take it over, and it soon became a favorite of art dealers, actors, and magazine folk.

King had first visited the Ivy in the mid-’70s. “It was old, decrepit, and I was fascinated,” he says. Beginning in 1983, he and Corbin repeatedly offered to buy it, but their offers were spurned. When it went on the market in 1989 they pounced.

King says he and Corbin took an American approach to running restaurants. “We wanted to break rules. We weren’t obsequious.” They also took a cue from the egalitarian Chelsea trattorias of the 1960s, where aristocrats dined alongside up-from-the-streets types

like David Bailey. “The most interesting people are often the least affluent,” says King. “We’re interested in people for who they are, not what they earn. We’re not impressed by money.” They hold to that philosophy today; a magazine writer eating a \$10 grilled-cheese sandwich might dine next to a mogul scarfing down a \$60 Dover sole at the Colony Grill Room.

But money does matter, and it wasn’t long before Margaret Thatcher’s 1986 deregulation of the London Stock Exchange stoked the appetites that produced British superchefs such as Marco Pierre White and Gordon Ramsay and popular spots like the River Café and Terence Conran’s Bibendum. By the time Tony Blair’s Cool Britannia of the ’90s was overthrown by today’s new order of international finance, London’s restaurant scene was cooking on 12 burners.

In 1998, Corbin and King were onto their third restaurant revival, J. Sheekey. They’d bought the 102-year-old landmark off Leicester Square out of liquidation that year, but renovations had stretched them

to their financial limits and Corbin was feeling vulnerable; he’d been diagnosed with leukemia a week after they reopened the Ivy and had had a bone-marrow transplant in 1994. Just then, the owner of chains of pizza and mussels-and-beer restaurants offered to buy them out for “what seemed like a lot of money, about \$23 million,” and leave them in charge. They took 40 percent of the purchase price in shares. That was their undoing. “They made mistakes,” King says. “And then our share price fell,” and after two years, they walked away from Le Caprice, the Ivy, and J. Sheekey.

They decided to open a hotel and, while looking for a property (losing several opportunities along the way: “We tried to be gentlemen,” says King, “then somebody with elbows and a checkbook would push us out of the way”), found the space that became the Wolseley. King, who’d taken the lead due to Corbin’s illness, had always dreamt

of opening a grand café. Their new venture, named after the cars sold in the 1920s in the landmarked former auto showroom, was an immediate success, in 2003, but, “We screwed up,” King continues. After 16 years of going it alone, they’d brought in investors: three property-owning billionaire brothers who sold their interest to a financial group that was promptly brought down by the Great Recession. “They didn’t have any money,” says King. “We were left in limbo.” By then a rival had entered London’s restaurant scene.

Richard Caring’s office building is a stone’s throw from the site where his father, Luigi Caringi, ran a London garment showroom, selling “dresses for elderly ladies,” Caring says. Luigi was an American casualty of World War II, a Neapolitan Catholic who’d married his nurse, a London-born Jewish girl of Polish descent.

Caring (his father dropped the last vowel from their name) quit school at 15, in 1965, to join the family business. Eighteen months

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later, he struck out on his own, selling miniskirts and hot pants. His father “didn’t understand Mary Quant and the Beatles,” says Caring, who then moved into knitwear and, in the late ’60s, became one of the first Westerners manufacturing fashion in Hong Kong. “I was like a kid in a sweets shop,” he says, “the first white man in Hong Kong since the opium dealers.” Only he got addicted to selling sweaters for four times what it cost to make them. Caring moved to China, where he first encountered Philip Green, a British retailer’s son making jeans there. They began working together in the 1990s, when Green was assembling a fashion-retail empire. They both got very rich.

Then, Green tried to take over Marks & Spencer, the huge department store chain. He planned to put Caring in charge of its supply chain, “a full-time job,” says Caring, so he promoted underlings into his jobs, promising each a free hand. When Green’s bid failed, “I was unemployed,” Caring continues, albeit only for the week before he was offered the chance to buy a prestigious country club. He won it in an auction in which, he admits, he overpaid. “I have a severe inferiority complex. I don’t like to be outbid, which is a weakness.” To turn it into a strength, he had “to make the purchase look semisensible,” so in 2005 he approached Le Caprice (where he dined, he says, “when I could get in”), about taking over the club’s food and beverage operations—and ended up buying two companies. One held the former Corbin & King restaurants, whose chef director was Mark Hix.

Initially, Caring and Hix followed their lead, opening Scott’s, which, in business for decades, had a legacy to build on dating back to the 19th century. After Hix went out on his own, Caring opened another, 34, but it never caught fire. He keeps trying: Sexy Fish, a sprawling Asian-inspired seafood restaurant codesigned by Frank Gehry, is opening on Berkeley Square this fall. Plus, his approach has broadened to include the dining equivalent of the off-the-peg fashions that made his fortune; he’s debuted brand extensions and foreign franchises of his Ivy, Daphne’s, Rivington, and J. Sheekey, and partnered with Keith McNally to open their Balthazar offshoot. Caring also bought 80 percent of the aggressively expanding Soho House chain of private clubs.

None of that was terribly controversial. His purchase of another group of hyperexclusive private clubs, including Annabel’s, created by the late nightlife legend Mark Birley, was another story. In 2008 Caring expanded them, too, adding the Club at the Ivy, with a blingy-bright entrance a few doors down from its far more humble-looking mothership. That, combined with Caring’s blatant success and ambition, set those class-conscious British teeth gnashing.

When asked why he thinks he’s been deemed socially ambitious and too apt to wield sharp elbows, Caring says that “a small amount of jealousy gets a lot of press.” The first accusation is natural: “When a child of two poor immigrant families buys the jewel in the crown,” he continues, “it’s bound to [cause] some ‘aristocratic’ upset.” As to

the second charge, “In an industry of any consequence, there will be rivalry among the top players.”

Caring’s rivals include Birley’s son, Robin, whom Caring dismissed as a twit after suing to stop him from opening a club named Birley’s. Birley finally called his club 5 Hertford Street. It has a waiting list of 1,000, and Birley is now seeking to pull a Caring and open a branch in New York’s Flatiron District. There’s also Arkady Novikov, a pal of Vladimir Putin’s who owns more than 50 restaurants in Moscow and London. He thought he’d be a partner in Sexy Fish. “But Caring signed a lease and tossed him overboard,” says a well-connected Londoner. Neither Birley nor Novikov will discuss Caring. Though Jeremy King is widely known to loathe Caring, too, he tiptoes away from that subject. “Richard is a restaurant owner; we are restaurateurs,” is all he will say, but that distinction is at the heart of the battle driving London’s dining scene.

Caring is just as careful when speaking of Chris Corbin and Jeremy King. “They’re damned good at what they do,” he says, but he adds that the restaurant business has changed, and he clearly feels he’s better suited for an era when it’s come to resemble the fashion world, in which one conglomerate can own many brands, reaching consumers at all socioeconomic levels. “We’re aggressive as a company,” he says. “We’re not frightened.” Later he adds, “This is a business. Maybe that’s the difference between a restaurateur and an owner.”

“I believe people in London want to experience London,” says Jeremy King. “You have to react to where you are or the world becomes homogenized.”

In late 2006 Corbin & King opened St. Alban on Lower Regent Street. Their first real failure, it closed three years later, a victim of the financial crisis. “It was too big,” says King. “The idea was right—Chris said it had to be new, not just wood paneling and fish cakes—but we got it

wrong.” Then they were, as the Brits say, gazumped, when they leased a building across the street from the Covent Garden Market, only to see Richard Caring “wrest the site” away with a higher bid, King says, “which was devastating.” It became London’s Balthazar. Though Keith McNally had vowed never to dilute his brands, Caring spent years pursuing him, first offering \$100 million to buy his company, in 2008.

Was Caring trying to buy his own Corbin and King? “What attracted me was McNally’s success,” he says. “We made him an offer he couldn’t refuse. He had a free hand.” Unfortunately, Balthazar got so-so reviews and failed to generate the sort of excitement it had in New York. McNally responded to an interview request with an e-mail reading, “Better I stay out of this.”

Corbin and King suffered another misfire, in 2009, when the duo partnered with *Vanity Fair* editor Graydon Carter and others to revive New York’s midtown Monkey Bar. The Englishmen pulled out of that deal in 2011. “A camel is a horse designed by a committee,” says King by way of explanation.

Corbin and King's Restoration coincided with King taking over and Corbin stepping back into a supporting role in their enduring partnership. King lined up new backers and began planning grand cafés like the Delaunay, which fared better with local restaurant critics than Caring's Balthazar clone. Then King gave Caring a taste of his own cooking.

Corbin & King's Colbert occupies the former site of a local boulevard café called Oriel. Once again, Caring and King went head-to-head over a lease; only this time, it was King who did the gazumping, winning the contest. After "talking to the locals," King says, he decided to retain, but radically upgrade, Oriel's Paris-in-London theme. "I believe people in London want to experience London," he says. "You have to react to where you are or the world becomes homogenized." Colbert, opened in 2012, is clearly aimed at a local crowd, not London's latest elite, which, King doesn't say but it's obvious from those filling the seats in their restaurants, are Caring's crowd.

Caring doesn't disagree, proudly acknowledging that his rise has ruffled fine feathers. "That's what happened," he says, but he adds, "I have nothing but respect for them." And he smiles when told that among the toffs at 5 Hertford Street, it's being said that Arkady Novikov, the jilted Sexy Fish partner, has started a Hate Caring Club. "That's not quite correct," Caring insists. "It's not over yet. We're still friends." Then he gets in a \$224,000 Mercedes-Benz and heads to a party at 10 Downing Street. Both the ride and the destination are evidence of his arrival.

But as it happens, two nights earlier, Jeremy King had also spent an evening with No. 10's occupant, Prime Minister David Cameron. So all the tensions notwithstanding, both can afford to be diplomatic. Caring "is no schmuck," says King. "He's strong, clever, and hard-nosed. Unquestionably, my life would have been easier in many ways without him, but he's helped raise everyone's game."

Making diners this food fight's clearest winners. ♦

IT HAPPENED HERE

Caring's Ivy and King's Wolseley are some of London's most see-and-be-seen restaurants. Here, the dish on who's eaten where. **By Jessica Flint**

The Wolseley



LUCIAN FREUD

The artist used to dine here almost nightly. On the day he died, in 2011, the restaurant set his regular table, number 32, with a black cloth and a single candle.

JACK NICHOLSON

Upon leaving the restaurant in 2008, the actor was asked by a photographer to comment on Heath Ledger, who had just died after filming *The Dark Knight*, the movie in which Ledger played the Joker, a role that Nicholson had played in the 1980s. Nicholson responded, "I warned him."

DAMIEN HIRST

The artist used to order porridge during frequent breakfast meetings with his business manager, Frank Dunphy, from 2004 until Dunphy retired, in 2010. In September, Hirst published *Portraits of Frank: The Wolseley Drawings*, a book of the sketches Hirst made of Dunphy at the restaurant.



RALPH FIENNES

The actor has said he loves the spot because everyone leaves him alone. Once, he sat in the corner, ordered a burger, and talked to himself as he was learning lines for Samuel Beckett's play *First Love*.



NICOLE KIDMAN AND KEITH URBAN

This is where the actress-singer couple made their first appearance after the birth of their first daughter, Sunday Rose, in 2008.

KATE MOSS

Before the supermodel and her husband, Jamie Hince, reportedly split this summer, the pair were often spotted here eating lunch and dinner. Moss, like Freud, likes table 32.

The Ivy

PRINCESS DIANA

The royal celebrated her 32nd birthday at the restaurant, which let her break a rule: Atop her pink birthday cake were candles one of her friends brought in—something the restaurant never allows.

The princess's son Prince Harry has dined here recently.



HUGH GRANT

The actor was one of the early patrons to visit the restaurant after it reopened in June. Model Lily Cole, actors Luke Evans and Steven Berkoff, and former *Top Gear* presenter Jeremy Clarkson were also among the first.



VICTORIA BECKHAM

The executive chef, Gary Lee, says he's often asked what Beckham likes to eat. "Food," the chef has quipped.

HELEN MIRREN

The actress, who lives in East London's Wapping, doesn't usually go into town specifically for dinner. However, after work on the West End, she likes to gather here with fellow actors to drink and talk about how terrible (or wonderful) the audience was.



KATE MOSS

Last year, artist Jane McAdam Freud used the left breast of Moss, a regular, as a model for the restaurant's new champagne glasses.