

THE VINSON VIEW

Quality maniac and master shopper Nick Vinson on the who, what, when, where and why



HOW JEREMY KING TAKES CARE OF HIS CLIENTELE

Some of Corbin & King's restaurants operate through a centralised reservations team, which takes the strain away from front of house staff during serving hours. King keeps an eye on them through a glass partition in his office above The Wolseley. Two reservations directors oversee all calls and jump in if necessary, while a special team manages private dining requests.

King suggests emailing or calling rather than booking online as usually only 70 per cent of tables are offered that way. The centralised team operates from 9am-8pm during the week and 9am-6pm at weekends. Outside of these hours, calls go direct to the restaurants. Emails sent overnight get an out-of-office reply before being viewed at 7am and replied to from 9am.

The system uses number recognition, but most customers know to give their name at the start, as Corbin & King hold back tables for regulars. Software links all calls, emails and online bookings with a group database, so a good client of one restaurant will never be a stranger when they try another within the group. The system also keeps a note of your preferences and naturally it knows that Nicky is very Picky.

01 Regular investments

Picky Nicky has reservations about restaurant booking systems

In June 2014, after a run around Regent's Park, I stopped off at Fischer's, a Viennese-inspired restaurant in Marylebone that was about to officially open. Despite sporting running gear, I was greeted enthusiastically by its elegantly-dressed owner Jeremy King, who was hosting a soft pre-opening night. I booked a table for later that week and have been back 128 times since. Getting a table by phone or by email is always simple and swift, and if I pop in at any time of day, no matter how busy, I am greeted by name and found a table.

When Fucina, on the corner of Chiltern and Paddington Streets, appeared to be open, I did the same thing, although this time I was dressed more appropriately. It too was having a pre-opening for 'friends only', but I was informed I was not one. Instead of taking my booking on the spot, I was given a business card and told to call. Despite the brush-off, I made a booking and headed there with Wallpaper* fashion director Isabelle Kountoure, but, after an officious doorman blocked our way, and a so-so meal, I decided not to bother them again.

I am not keen on using online booking systems. They lack the personal touch and, in the competitive London market, restaurants that attend to the individual needs of their regulars stand out. I prefer to call or email for a booking, but trying to get

into Gymkhana in Mayfair or Trishna in Marylebone, my two favourite Indian restaurants, has always been a challenge. Despite 12 visits to Trishna last year, I am still treated appallingly by its reservations team. Emails go unanswered for more than 24 hours, and sometimes I have to send emails twice. It's even worse at Gymkhana. I complained to the managing director of JKS, which runs both restaurants, and now I have a real person in reservations to contact. But I still had to be flexible for a December booking requested in October, and I had to compile and send back a form with my credit card details to secure it. I know I can't compare the ease of getting a table in Florence and Milan to London, but if Chiltern Firehouse and Spring can expedite my bookings with grace, then so can others. You can't become a restaurant regular if you have to fight so hard.

I quizzed King, who runs a number of great spots, including The Wolseley, with his business partner Chris Corbin, about how they get the feel of their restaurants so right (see above right). With the standard in London so high, it's his view that it's not enough just to be the new kid on the block. 'You want to feel welcome,' says King. 'The best restaurant is the one that you are known best in. It's the moment that you are addressed by name.' ★



02

Fit the bill

Before I first walked into Fischer's, I had been running (which is what allows me to enjoy all the dining). My current favourite running gear is by Soar. soarrunning.com



03

Canteen dream

My new regular dining spot is Rochelle Bar & Canteen, which just opened at a new location at the ICA on London's The Mall. arnoldandhenderson.com