

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *HOTEL BABYLON*

IMOGEN EDWARDS-JONES
& ANONYMOUS



RESTAURANT BABYLON

'A GLORIOUS BEHIND-THE-SCENES
ACCOUNT OF LONDON'S DEBAUCHED
HOSPITALITY BUSINESS'

Observer

About the Book

What makes a restaurant hot? Whose name do you need to drop to get a table? Why is one place booked solid for the next nine months while somewhere equally delicious is as empty and inhospitable as the Gobi desert?

Welcome to the restaurant business, where the hours are punishing, the conditions are brutal and the Chef's Special has been languishing at the back of the fridge for the past three days.

This is an industry plagued with obsessives. Why else do some chefs drive themselves crazy in pursuit of elusive Michelin stars, when in reality all they're doing is 'making someone else's tea'?

Nothing is left to chance: the lighting, the temperature or even the cut of the salmon fillet. There's even a spot of psychology behind the menu. What do they want you to order? What makes them the most money? And why should you really hold back on those side dishes?

In *Restaurant Babylon*, Imogen Edwards-Jones and her anonymous industry insider lift the lid on all the tricks of the food trade and what really makes this £90 billion a year industry tick. So please do sit down, pour yourself some heavily marked-up wine and make yourself comfortable (although we'll need that table back by 8.30 sharp).

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About the Author

Also by Imogen Edwards-Jones & Anonymous

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Restaurant Babylon

IMOGEN EDWARDS-JONES
& Anonymous

For Rafe

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Prologue

All of the following is true. Only the names and some circumstances have been changed to protect the guilty. All the anecdotes, the stories, the characters, the situations, the highs, the lows, the scams, the drugs, the misery, the love, the death and the insanity are exactly as was told to me by Anonymous - a collection of some of the finest chefs, maître d's, sommeliers, owners and insiders working in the restaurant industry today. However, for legal reasons the stories now take place in a fictitious restaurant with a fictitious owner. Narrated by Anonymous, thousands of hours of experience and knowledge have been compressed into twenty-four. Everything else is as it should be. The chefs shout, the owners smile, and the rich just carry on eating. It's just another twenty-four hours in one of London's finest dining establishments.

6-7 a.m.

I must change that ring tone. There're only so many times you can listen to sodding *Mission Impossible* without wanting to stick it in a chicken and rotisserie the hell out of it for the next six hours. Christ, my head hurts. A man of my age should not be drinking jägerbombs in some nameless Soho dive with a steel door and sweat sliding off the walls at four in the morning. It's pathetic. I've been in the restaurant business long enough to know it's either vodka or a fine red wine, and bed before the birds; anything else will make you wish you hadn't been born. And right now I'd like to return to the cosy confines of a snug womb, never to surface again.

Where the hell's my phone? I sit up. My brain joins me a few seconds later. My small, smoke-choked flat comes into focus. It's still dark outside but the orange glow of the nearby streetlight illuminates the sad, single room in all its filthy glory. I inhale and then yawn. The air smells of fags, alcohol and guilt. I was only supposed to be staying here for a few months. It was a quick pit stop before my divorce came through, but it's been over six months now. Most of which has been spent sleeping in this crappy armchair. I've got a bed. Quite a nice one, actually. I managed to save it from the fire sale that was the breakdown of my marriage and it's got White Company linen and plenty of pillows. But I just don't seem to get into it much. By the time I get home, I'm usually too many sheets to the wind to get further than the armchair, and there I remain until morning. Or until some sod wakes me up.

Finally I spot my phone, next to the skid-marked mirror, the rolled-up twenty-pound note, and the pile of Camel full-strength fighting for butt space in the ashtray. Oh shit, I think, looking at the flashing screen. It's Adam.

'What?' I say, my lips cracking. My mouth is drier than a Mormon wedding. 'This had better be good.'

'It's shit, mate,' shouts Adam, his thick Aussie accent echoing cavernously around whichever hellhole he is currently frequenting. 'It's totally shit! Some fucking sturdy bird's had a shag in the dunny and I'm up to my cock in water.'

I frown. Talking of water, I really fancy a glass. I slowly pull myself out of the chair and, stumbling towards the kitchen sink, I trip over a pair of black high heels.

'It's unbelievable how much damage a big, fat arse can do!' continues Adam. 'One of the basins is totally fucked. It's hanging off the wall, the pipe's bust and there's water all the way through to the gents. Mate, it's a disaster! I've called Pavel six times already this morning but I think he must have pissed off back to Poland, which is a bit rich because he hasn't told me, or you, or anyone, and now we are in the shit. Quite literally.'

'There's shit as well?'

'Well, no, not literally.'

'Oh.' I look back down at the shoes.

'Is Gina with you?' he asks. 'From the club? The one you offered a job to?'

'Oh, her,' I reply finally, as the whole sorry evening comes slowly ebbing back.

Quite what Adam and I thought we were doing last night I do not know. Nico, the deputy manager of Le Bar, which I own and Adam runs, was going back to Italy after eighteen months of mixing mojitos and martinis, and we were giving him a bit of a send-off. Normally I tend just to show my face at these sorts of events and then bugger off, as it is not a great look to get plastered with your own troops. The last

thing they need to witness is their boss getting totally legless, feeling up the waiting staff, and helping himself to the bar. It makes it a little difficult to give them a bollocking the next morning when you, yourself, are in disgrace. Also, an all-night club crawl is not really necessary for a forty-something bloke with two failed marriages behind him. It stinks of desperation.

But, obviously, I did not heed my own advice and shall certainly regret it today. And I've got one of those days. I really don't need this hangover and I certainly don't need to be woken up at this unearthly hour.

I am such an idiot. I can't believe I allowed myself to be persuaded to 'go on'. The last time Adam and I hit Soho we ended up in the very same dive we went to last night and I thumped him. Adam was being all lippy and pissed and had attracted the attention of some heavy blokes at the bar. Suited and booted, straight from work in his best Gucci, we'd had a catch-up dinner, discussing staff problems (particularly Damon, who has a whiff of the dodgy about him), and the whole thing got out of control, as it tends to do with Adam. We moved on to my divorce from Sketchley (as Adam insists on calling my ex) and on to his obsession with Pippa, or more accurately Pippa the head chef at my brasserie La Table's tits. Anyway, it was around three and we were on the vodka tonics and these big lads covered in tats started lining up by the bar, crunching their knuckles, baring their tiny Tic Tac teeth and looking our way. Adam, full of booze, blow and bravado, whipped off his Gucci jacket and turned to me.

'Come on, mate,' he slurred. 'Let's get 'em.'

Given the choice between being pummelled into a small doughball by the butch blokes at the bar or knocking Adam out, I chose the latter. I swung round and hit him so hard on the cheek that he keeled over immediately. The blokes at the bar looked stunned, and quite possibly a little disappointed that I had curtailed their fun. Adam, on the

other hand, was so sodding grateful the next day, because he'd managed to get out of the bar, jaw intact, that he bought me a magnum of Laurent Perrier Rosé which must have set him back at least £90 as a thank-you. The small bruise below his right eye, he concluded, was a lot better than what might have been.

So, given the previous welcome we'd received in the dive bar, I am amazed we went back. We must have been drunk. *Obviously* we were drunk.

Alcohol is a big problem in this business. It is a major part of it. I mean, you don't go into the restaurant industry if you haven't a hint of the epicurean about you. It is not the sort of profession that attracts people who don't like a good time, who aren't a little bit greedy, or keen on their booze. I've worked with seven head chefs over the past fifteen years and I have taken four of them to open AA meetings. One of them was so out of control we had to hold an intervention in the kitchen with all the staff around and, eventually, we managed to persuade him he had a problem. The fact that he used to come to work drunk and was constantly swigging from a bottle of Jack Daniel's (why is it always Jack Daniel's?) he kept under the pass was apparently 'nothing to worry about'. Anyway, I haven't spoken to him in a while. I think he's sobered up now and is running his own place in some seaside town near Norwich.

'Norfolk,' as Adam once said, 'where chefs go to die.'

But chef burn-out is common. The hours, the lack of light, the stress of the kitchen - after a while they all get this vampiric waxy white look that makes them appear like they've recently been exhumed. The shelf life of a chef is often quite short. The trick is to catch them when they're young and on the way up, when they're brilliant and creative and full of energy and ideas, when they are happy to do the hours and not have a family life. Then you ditch them when they peak and plateau and have nothing left to say. The smart ones get out then; they get a nice fat hotel

somewhere, with their own kitchen garden and some overpriced rooms out the back. And then there are the others who just fall by the wayside.

I have this exact problem at my other place at the moment. I've had Le Restaurant for five years now and my head chef, Andrew James, is rather quickly and surely tumbling off the rails. He's always been one of those shouty little shits who gets right in your face before he calls you a cunt. But when you've got a Michelin star in your pocket, you tend to get away with that sort of kitchen 'banter'. However, in the last couple of months he's been missing days, shouting more, whacking the commis around, dishing out the slaps and committing the most cardinal of chef sins: he's been inconsistent in his cooking. So, after much talking and cajoling, I have managed to persuade him to walk, and I have also managed to lure his more charming and talented ex-number two, Oscar Richards, back from where he's been training with Michel Bras in southern France. Quite how I achieved such a Ban Ki-moon feat I shall never know. But Oscar arrives in a couple of hours to initiate the handover; meanwhile I have exploding toilets in Le Bar and, seemingly, a new colleague in my bed to contend with.

'So did you get to first base?' quizzes Adam with a smutty chuckle.

'A gentleman doesn't share details,' I declare, slightly embarrassed by the fact that I'd clearly fallen asleep in my chair before I could even take my socks off.

'Oh,' he replies. 'Is she still there?'

'No,' I lie, peeking my head around the door to see a nest of blonde hair on one of my numerous pillows. 'She left.'

'So I'll call Pimlico Plumbers, seeing as Pavel has pissed off into the ether?'

'Isn't there anyone else?'

'I know they're expensive—'

'Just do it. I'm on my way.'

Any excuse not to deal with the bedroom blonde. You'd have thought that two divorces and two children I barely have monthly access to would have made me a little more circumspect about pulling random women in subterranean nightclubs, but I've always found a pretty girl hard to resist. I remember a friend of my dad's once telling me that when he ran a restaurant in the seventies he didn't sleep alone for five years. They had some rooms over the top and they were constantly in use, even between courses. Customers would take a break between the boeuf bourguignon and the apple pie for a swift one upstairs.

'They're quick those Brummies,' he used to say. 'The pudding never got cold.'

Outside, and the streets of London hang heavy with a chilly, dank fog. It is the last week of November and there is that distinct cinnamon whiff of Christmas in the air. The restaurant business loves Christmas. It adores it almost as much as a gift-paper-shredding three-year-old, high on sugared almonds. and it makes us feel just as ill. All year long we wait for it; gagging for it because in many an establishment up to 90 per cent of our annual profit can be made in the last four weeks of the year. It is a licence to print money. But it is also the most exhausting, ball-aching twenty-eight days of your life. If you can survive Christmas in a kicking West End joint, you can get through almost anything.

I have three places in the West End - Le Restaurant, Le Bar and La Table - and, at all three of these venues, we're preparing to welcome the festive season in with the largest bear hug and the sleightest of hand, as we pat you on the back and dip your pocket at the same time. You give: we take. But hopefully you'll be so gently anaesthetized by fine wines and bonhomie, you won't feel a thing until your credit card statement at the end of January.

My bachelor pad, such as it is, is above La Table - the newest addition to my nascent empire. A forty-seater

brasserie serving premium quality soups, salads and steaks with all-day lattes of every intolerant special need, we are mainly after the yummy mummy market as there is a private school handily not far from the site. We are turning over a useful £28,000 a week but the rent is a steep £4,000, so I have a chat booked in with Pippa and her tits today as we've got to have a little re-think about our margins. I need to get our GP (gross profit) up or we're in trouble.

A ten-minute walk up the road on Jackson Street, just near Conduit Street where Mayfair teeters towards Soho, I have a bar and a restaurant at either end of the road. Le Restaurant, my pride and joy, my pain and the mistress of both my divorces, was the first place I opened. A sixty-cover restaurant, it took ten years of graft to get there and another two years to get a Michelin star, which we have managed to retain for the last three. Although quite how we made the grade last year is anyone's guess, what with Andrew's inconsistency and Sketchley's feather-spitting front-of-house attitude towards any pretty girl who walked into the room. And bearing in mind we were well-reviewed by A. A. Gill in the *Sunday Times*, Giles Coren in the Saturday edition of *The Times* and Fay Maschler in the *Evening Standard*, we had plenty of them, holding the porky hands of fat-walleted businessmen as they swung through the revolving door.

Not bad for a bloke from Kidderminster with two O-levels (Pottery and Geography) and a BTEC from Stratford College. Back then I wasn't really focused on the job, it was just something to do, with my limited options and qualifications. I remember using my Escoffier, *Le Guide Culinaire*, to roll my joints on. Pages from *Hering's Dictionary of Classical and Modern Cookery* and Saulnier's *Le Répertoire de la Cuisine* were used for roaches between lessons. But, you know, I was seventeen years old and my parents had more or less washed their nice middle-class hands of me: what else was a lad to do except get drunk at

lunchtime and waste the afternoons freeze-drying his books in the new-fangled machine they'd just taken delivery of at the college?

And then, after learning some rudimentary knife skills and how to spatchcock a partridge, I was released into the wonderful world of West Midlands cuisine, where the women were blondes, the carpets were shag pile, and the cars were almost always Jags. Not that this culinary cabal was remotely interested in receiving me.

The first place I worked, a symphony of pale pink napery and mock Tudor beams, I was bullied, beaten and locked in the chest freezer for three hours in my first week. The second week I was bundled into the walk-in fridge and forced to stay there shivering and shaking next to thirty-one prawn cocktails for the next five hours, half of my whole ten-hour shift. When I was finally released, with blue lips and a cock the size of a button mushroom, no one uttered a word.

The worst night came a couple of months later. It was a fine-dining fortieth-birthday-party extravaganza. Some bloke, big in car dealerships, had taken over the place and I was ordered to do eighty-five Parma Ham and Melon. I made the mistake of leaving half a blue label on one of the melons and the restaurant manager - Frank was his name - came marching back into the kitchen and shouted: 'What fucking cunt chef fucking cunting did this?'

I made the foolish mistake of owning up. I said I was terribly sorry. I think I even grovelled.

Then the head chef said, 'Yes, you will be fucking sorry.' And he head-butted me, knocking me out cold. I hit the deck and was dragged out by my feet, and put back into the walk-in fridge for the rest of service. I was the lowest of the low.

Correction. *Paul* was the lowest of the low. He was the *plongeur* and he had, as was common in those days, learning difficulties. The poor bloke was subject to much

more bullying and baiting than I was. I remember he was once bet £10 to eat his own shit sandwich, which he was only too willing to do, between two slices of bread. It was appalling. Eventually, he was pushed so hard that he snapped and punched the head chef during the middle of service. I have to say it was hard not to slap him on the back and congratulate the worm for turning at last. He was fired, of course, on the spot, but he did return to reap a delicious revenge.

The night following Paul's dismissal we had a banquet for some one hundred and fifty people. It was, naturally, coq au vin (it was a salubrious establishment) all prepared in flats (a stainless steel dish that contained ten portions of coq). The starters were back and the mains were away, when suddenly Frank comes steaming back into the kitchen shouting, 'What the *fuck* is going on? What have you done to the coq au vin, chef?'

'Nothing,' I replied.

'It tastes of fucking Domestos!' he yelled back, his old champagne breath getting right up my nose.

Transpires that Paul was a lot smarter than anyone ever gave him credit for and, as he'd collected his wages that day, he'd slipped a bottle of Domestos into the coq. The shit really hit the fan that night. One hundred and fifty mains were returned and another one hundred and fifty fillet steaks were cooked very medium rare (due to time constraints) and served with a selection of ropey old battoned carrots we happened to have in the fridge.

But now I've got a bar, a brasserie, and a destination restaurant with a £3 million turnover and one star. Although the star is not mine, and nor does it belong to the restaurant, and when Andrew pisses off, which he will do next week, we'll be crawling with Michelin inspectors checking to see if they'll give it back. But still, it's a long way from Kidderminster. It's a long way from Frank and it's

a long way from the shit chef with a hard head and a penchant for dumping commis in the freezer.

That's what I like about the restaurant business, it is all about reinvention: Gordon, Heston, Marcus, Marco, the list goes on - we're all boys from the provinces making it in the big smoke. There's a touch of Dick Whittington syndrome in chef world; get it right and the streets of London really are paved with gold. Get it wrong and you end up in Norfolk!

I can hear Adam's Aussie twang from here as I turn the corner into Jackson Street. Le Bar was an old Edwardian town house that I spent rather too much money (half a million quid) gutting and transforming into the sort of place to attract the high-spending cocktail crowd. We get the art trade from Bond Street, we get fashionistas and the hairdressers from Bruton Street and we are close enough to Hanover Square to get the Condé Nast girls as they leave Totty Towers on their way home. They favour a cocktail called a Skinny Bitch - vodka, lime and soda - which has about as many calories at the three Haribo they've eaten all day.

As you walk into Le Bar there's a long glossy black bar to the right, with plenty of fat black leather perching stools nestled along its length. We have some low leather armchairs and small round cocktail tables with low-lit lamps on the left for couples and gangs of four. Towards the back, next to the indoor palms and taller standard lamps, there are larger soft sofas and more comfortable armchairs for the serious drinkers, as well as a couple of crimson-velvet booths with banquette seating which always go first. We serve a few small plates from the tiny basement kitchen, mainly chips, fish goujons and plates of honey-coated chipolatas, along with olives, nuts and Chinese cracker things that I find utterly unpalatable, but which seem to go down well with the Totty Towers crowd. The

place works. We are turning over £70,000 a week. The lighting is low and the music is loud enough not to make conversation essential.

'Thank Christ!' declares Adam as I walk through the door. In his early thirties, slim and fit, with plenty of thick dark hair and pale eyes, Adam's the sort of bloke girls write their phone number on. He's funny, charming and knows how to work a room. He's also got the stamina of an ox. He quite often stays up the whole night and kicks on through to the next day. The only way you'd know is his insistence on a Bloody Mary for breakfast.

'Check this out,' he says, nodding over his shoulder.

I follow him through the swing doors and into the toilets at the back. The black and white checked floor is covered in about two inches of water, although the white tiled walls appear to be surviving; the light bulbs around the mirrors are working but in the middle of the row of three basins, one hangs limply from the wall, swinging on its own plumbing.

Adam shakes his head. 'Can you believe it? It's totally rooted.'

'It looks bad,' I acknowledge.

'I mean how fucking fat was she?'

'How d'you know it was a big girl?'

'Damon said he saw her go in with some chubby chaser.' He nods. 'Arse the size of Texas.'

'What's the water damage like?' I can feel it beginning to seep into my leather-soled Church's shoes.

'It'll be fine,' says Adam. 'The plumber's on his way and I'll get the cleaners to mop up. We'll be fine by lunch - before then, probably.'

'Great,' I cough, patting down my jacket pocket for my cigarettes. 'A couple of bulbs there also need replacing in the mirrors and how are the toilets?' I poke my head into the cubicle.

Running any place like this is all about the details. Are the glasses clean? Is the bar shining? Why isn't that curtain hanging properly? Why is that mirror dirty? What's happened to that lampshade? When were the lavs last cleaned? Where's the loo paper? Walk into any place with any restaurateur and they just can't help themselves. One glance of their gimlet eye and they'll be able to spot a crooked painting, a smeared fork and an un-plumped cushion at sixty paces. We're worse than any thin-lipped dowager duchess with OCD. My pet-hate? Trainers. Anyone who turns up in a pair of trainers gets sent home on the spot. I came in here last week and caught two of my staff wearing them behind the bar. I sent them both up to Oxford Street with £50 each to buy new shoes and personally shoved their best Nikes in the bin. I don't give a shit. There are standards.

My phone goes. 'Oh, that's the dealer,' I say, checking the number. 'He's waiting for me down the road.'

Adam shoots me a wink and taps the side of his nose. 'Make mine two,' he grins.

7-8 a.m.

Five minutes later and I'm slowly sinking deep into the front seat of Reza's over-heated Mercedes. It must be about thirty degrees in here and half the seat springs are broken. The number of customer backsides must have given it repetitive strain injury. There is very little air in the car and what there is is laced with leather, flatulence and Magic Tree. I start to lick ten-pound notes off from a roll in my pocket, while he takes small paper packets out of a larger plastic bag.

'This is top quality stuff,' he sniffs, scratching his luxuriantly black sideburns. His fingernails are manicured and his left pinky is squeezed into a large flashy signet ring. 'It was all harvested at dawn. Iranian,' he adds. 'The quality is so much better.'

'I've gone right off the Spanish stuff,' I agree, counting out another tenner. 'It's all adulterated. I am not paying fifty pounds for ten grams of floral waste.'

'It's cut with crap,' he laughs, 'but look at this ...' He opens up a small packet. 'Red gold.'

Reza's been my saffron dealer for three years now. He's an affable chap with his own delivery business to half the restaurants in the capital. He also deals caviar, which I do purchase occasionally, but now that the sturgeon's been slaughtered into near extinction by the Russians up their end of the Caspian Sea, it seems a tad unethical to take it from the Iranians, just because they've got a few left. I know you can get farmed eggs these days from obscure places like Uruguay, and I think even the French are having

a go. But I'm a fan of those old big blue caviar tins and even those old yellow-lidded pots that the Russian sailors used to sell door-to-door fresh off the docks. Also, so much of it's been tampered and played with now it's often not worth the expense.

Saffron, on the other hand, we seem to get through by the packet load. It is also not cheap, around £6,000 a kilo, but when you consider it takes five hundred thousand crocus flowers to produce one kilo, you can see why. The stigmas must be hand picked between dawn and ten in the morning - after that they lose their colour and scent. They are then dried and are ready for use. Iranian saffron is darker than its European cousin, an autumnal red, and the aroma is denser.

'Wow,' I say, inhaling the sweet spicy scent. 'It smells fantastic. One hundred pounds for two?'

'Perfect.' He yawns. 'Are you sure you don't fancy some caviar?'

'No thanks, mate.'

'Isn't Oscar starting this week?'

'How do you know that?'

'I hear all the gossip.' He grins, broadly flashing a gang of golden molars that are clearly doubling as his pension plan.

'Starts today, in fact.'

'He's a nice man,' he says, taking my fistful of tenners and counting them. 'I remember him from before.'

'Mmm,' I agree, looking over the maroon velvet tissue box on the dashboard and into the cobbled mews beyond.

There, sitting on the back doorstep of the restaurant, rolling up an unsuspecting-looking fag, is one of my commis chefs, Sean. I like Sean. He's a young lad, full of Irish charm and in the early stages of Celtic tattoos. He's got a couple of symbols on each forearm, the plug earring, the bolt through the eyebrow, and he occasionally comes in with various shaved areas on his head. He looks exhausted.

'Thanks, Reza,' I say, getting out of the car and pocketing the saffron. 'I'll give you a call soon.' Closing the door behind me, I make my way towards Sean as he lights up. 'You all right, mate?' I say, raising my voice as I come down the alley. He looks over; his eyes are rimmed red and his face is ashen. 'Been here long?' He stares up at me and I am pretty sure he is trying to focus. 'You OK?'

'Oh, Boss!' He nods. 'Fine, mate, fine. I went out last night and I had some sleep but, you know, I thought I'd come in early.'

Bollocks, I think, looking at him. I know a dirty stop-out when I see one and Sean's come straight from a club. 'Good,' I lie. 'Just so long as you're OK. You've got a long shift to get through.'

'Tip-top, Boss.' He sniffs, exhaling his fag smoke in circular puffs.

'You coming in?' I ask, opening the back door.

'One sec,' he says, taking another large lug on his roll-up before flicking it across the cobbles.

I've met the likes of Sean many times before; they're all keen and interested in cooking, they've been to college, got the skills and come to London to become the next Gordon Ramsay, with their face on the telly, their home in a magazine, and a wife endlessly photographed endlessly shopping. But they get a bit distracted by the nightlife and the club scene on the way. I had one commis chef who started here eight months ago who used to pop an E up his arse at the beginning of service. He reliably informed Andrew that it made for an easy ride, putting it up the arse, and it meant he didn't get too high too quickly. Being a relatively straight bloke from Bradford, Andrew took a dim view of this 'entre nous' and Chris, I think his name was, was out on his Eed-up backside before you could say 'come down'.

Talk to anyone in the business and they'll tell you there's plenty of drugs on the scene. Mainly coke and on both sides

of the pass. The chefs are doing it to stay awake; the commis chefs are doing it out of exhaustion, misery and boredom; the maître d's are chopping out because they're hungover from the night before; the waiters are sharpening up before a shift - and out front there are punters, girlfriends, wives, partners (both business and sexual) all hungry for a line along with their wine. It's rife. It's London. It's everywhere. We're forever getting the *Evening Standard* hacks coming in to swab our toilets during London Fashion Week. It's tiresome. They just can't help themselves; it's quite sad really that they can't come up with another idea.

But coke is mainly rife in those hip places where the food is secondary to the fun: brasseries, chains, places where they flip burgers, flatten chickens and fry courgettes into chips. There, the turnover and the atmosphere are as high as the crowd and so are the chefs backstage.

It is less usual, although obviously not unheard of, in a Michelin-starred kitchen. Although who can forget the sad death of David Dempsey, head chef at Restaurant Gordon Ramsay, who fell from a block of flats after a night out on cocaine? But when you've got stars and staff and a soufflé that goes up or down in three and half minutes, you tend to be too much of a control freak to be under the influence of anything. Although I did hear recently that one of the hottest chefs in town at the moment has succumbed to the blow and you can begin to taste it in his cooking. It's not quite so precise, not quite so perfect as before. But the pressure to be good and stay at the top of your game is usually reason enough to 'just say no' and focus. Just ask Gordon and Marco. I was told they were both 'far too square' to take drugs - unlike myself, who has always been a little bit partial.

In the old days, I remember spending many an early morning quite literally sniffing my way around Covent Garden market, apologizing for my terrible 'cocktail cold'

while feeling up the cavolo nero. We'd have loads of nights out on the pop and chop - champagne and cocaine - and lock-ins were a regular thing in the first West End restaurant I worked in, learning to turn potatoes and pick bloody frisée lettuce for fifteen hours a day.

But things have changed, as indeed has Covent Garden. Andrew or I might still pop down there for a few essentials but we are much more likely now to use our own suppliers. We used to use Secretts, Greg Wallace's place just outside Godalming. They have great asparagus, but they've got a bit pricey for us, so we've moved on to Rushtons The Chef's Greengrocers who, although they have a place in New Covent Garden, deliver to our door.

We spend about £20,000 a year on veg but over £400,000 a year on meat, plus fish and wine. These are big contracts and you'd have thought that suppliers would be keen to keep them. But we had this bastard bloke who was always late with his order and consistently overweighed his produce, gently charging us a little extra every time, so we've recently moved to H. G. Walter in West Kensington, who supply The River Café. The legendary Caff, of course, gets first dibs at everything. The nicest grouse, the best partridge, the springiest lamb. But they've been with them for years and are the sort of restaurant that uses a whole prime £20 chicken to make even their most basic stocks; so you can't really begrudge them their top spot in the queue.

We're looking into our fish supplier at the moment. Last week the turbot came packed in a whole load of ice that, strangely, seemed to be included in the price. And when you're paying nearly £25 a kilo for one of the ugliest fish around and they include the ice, you know you can't trust the sod. So I am thinking of moving to this new bloke who apparently buys directly off the boats in Essex. Ben's Fish, I think he's called. You speak to him in the morning, he'll tell you what he thinks they are bringing in and it arrives shiny and spanking fresh (ice not included) at around four that

afternoon. He does a few places in the Islington area at the moment, Moro, St John and Trullo, and I'm debating whether to join them. Boat to plate in less than eight hours is a good USP. Most of the fish we get at the moment is at least twenty-four hours old.

With ingredients, it's all about freshness and provenance. The organic argument is a little bit supermarket. In the trade, husbandry and where you're sourcing your supply is far more important. Either your restaurant is completely organic or it's not. There's simply no point in shoving the word 'organic' in front of a dish or an ingredient and hoping it's going to impress the henna brigade - it just makes the place look amateur. Whether your beef has been butchered and hung properly and where it came from are far more important. And contrary to what the layman might think, if any of us comes across a great supplier or a source of good meat, we are much more likely to share the contact than hoard it. Great suppliers are rare and they need to be nurtured and encouraged, otherwise they go out of business. The more restaurants use the good ones, the more likely they are to survive.

Equally, there's nothing like a few charlatans to really put you off your coddled eggs. There's always a crooked supplier, and plenty of crooked chefs, to keep you on your toes. The oldest trick in the book is for the chef to over order and to sell on out the back. In one of the places where I used to work, the head chef was on a percentage from the fish guy. The fish would be delivered, and a third of it would disappear and be sold on. Then the delivery guy and the chef would split the proceeds fifty-fifty. He was only caught because another delivery bloke wanted in on the scam and when they refused, he shopped them both.

As an owner you have to be on it all the time, checking the invoices and watching the stock, otherwise you'll wake up one day to a terrible surprise. I remember my first boss in London told me how he went to dinner once at his head