

# AMERICAN EYE

## *Joe Allen: A Celebrated American in Britain turns 40*



*The unique Joe Allens, American dining in the heart of London Theatreland, photo credit Geoffrey Davies*

*Judith Schrut* goes behind the red canopy on a Covent Garden back street to meet the folks behind **Joe Allen**, as the iconic restaurant marks 40 memorable years as an American on the London scene.

### **What brought Joe Allen to Britain?**

It was the mid-1970s. The real Joe Allen, who ran his eponymous restaurant in New York, recognised the keen British taste for Americana. He wanted to offer something beyond burgers, a more sophisticated feel. That came together with a chance to buy property cheap in Covent Garden, which at that time was run down and off the beaten track. He saw the opportunity for something unique.

### **How has Joe's made its mark?**

From the beginning Joe's has gone out of its way not to be an American food or theme restaurant, but American-style dining, meaning a relaxed place for a great pre- or post-theatre experience and atmosphere, a solid menu, fabulous cocktails, and real cheesecake. And Joe's rejected the class system and instead embraced London's diversity way before it was openly acceptable to do so. When Joe's opened it was the only place in London where you could be sitting next to a punk on one side and a suited City boy on the other. We've also been the starting point for loads of amazing young chefs and people who

became key players on the UK restaurant scene, who helped re-define eating out in London. Rowley Leigh, Russell Norman and Jeremy King are all famous alumni. But it's a myth that Graham Norton once worked here as a waiter!

### **What keeps Joe's going after 40 years? What's changed and what's stayed the same?**

Loyalty plays a key part of Joe's longevity on the ever-changing London restaurant scene. Current

owners Lawrence Hartley and Tim Healy, who took over 5 years ago, are both experienced and successful restaurateurs. But, more importantly, both cherish fond memories of visits to Joe Allen in their youth, and care deeply about its heritage. Joe's has always relied on truly loyal staff, some of whom have been with us a very long time. Like Cathy, our general manager, who has worked here for over 25 years.

The London food scene has changed enormously since 1977 - the sheer number of restaurants and the boom in quality and choice,



*Fabulous cocktails and the first slider bar in Britain, photo credit Geoffrey Davies*



for example- but Joe Allen just keeps going like it's always been. We still have live piano every night, brunch on Sunday, and a traditional turkey dinner at Thanksgiving.

### **Tell us about a memorable moment at Joe's.**

On Joe's opening day, 14 January 1977, a smash hit new musical called *Chorus Line* had recently opened at nearby Drury Lane Theatre. The show's stars came and high-kicked their way down the stairs and across the bar to the show's hit tune, *Singular Sensation*. Since then we've had many stars dancing on the bar or playing the piano. Peter Cook and Richard Harris singing, drunkenly, round the piano, was a pretty memorable moment for us.

### **You've had quite a few notable diners over the years. Why did they come?**

Indeed, anybody who is anybody has been here. You can see their pictures on the walls. Rock Hudson, Al Pacino, Robert De Niro, Elizabeth Taylor, Robert Wagner, and Stephen Sondheim, to name a few. They'd expect to sit at one of the tables along the far wall, known as "the Fifties". Chita Rivera practically lived here when she visited London. Elaine Stritch had her own table. Kenneth Williams would always sit in the corner table and snipe at people. People came to be seen— not particularly for the food— which could be a bit wounding for the chefs! Joe's has always been a place to relax and feel comfortable. Theatre people, especially Americans playing the West End, would come here after a show, dressed in jeans or no makeup, for down time, to feel home from home. They could bring their lovers, boyfriends, mistresses, knowing Joe's firm policy: "we don't kiss and we don't tell".

### **Your pianist Jimmy was a legend, wasn't he?**

The great Jimmy Hardwick was our pianist for 37 years, the longest serving house pianist anywhere. He played 6 nights a week from our opening night till the day he died, aged 88. He was a real character, genuinely a legend in his own lunchtime. With Jimmy, our regular

customers each had their own tune which he'd play as soon as they walked in. This was known as a *Jimmy Jam*. He was such a talent, he knew every single show tune by heart. And if you were famous— or he fancied you— he might just let you sing with him at the piano.

### **Tell us three things about Joe's that might surprise us.**

Well, Joe Allen's was the first restaurant in the UK to have an American-style 'hatch' and a beer slider on our long bar. We have a secret underground passage from Joe Allen to our sister restaurant, *Orso*. Also, we have an incredible collection of first edition theatre posters and photos of American stage and screen greats lining our walls, but notably no Brits in any of our photos.

### **Tell us about your menu and the famous secret burger.**

Well, from the beginning Joe refused to have burgers on our menu. But diners wanted burgers, so they became our 'secret' menu item. They've always been our best seller, but they're still not on the menu and never will be. From the menu we'd suggest starting with our Caesar salad, beautifully executed, followed by either sticky ribs or *Mac Ragu*, with a side of fries and coleslaw. Finish with pecan pie or our classic chocolate brownie smothered in ice cream. Or, if you're a vegetarian, try the three-bean chili from our Green Menu. And a cold American beer, of course.

### **How is Joe's marking its 40th birthday and what does the future look like?**

We're having a year-long party with lots of surprises and treats, including a £19.77 retro menu. As for what's next, we're super-excited about moving house very soon. But we really don't feel we're moving the restaurant: we'll still be nearby, in Covent Garden, the whole team are coming with us and we intend to keep our soul!

Joe Allen's is at 13 Exeter Street, London WC2, moving nearby soon. Our thanks to Geoffrey Davies for his photography, and to Lawrence, Cathy, Sadie, Francesco and the rest of Joe's lovely team.



## **INDEPENDENCE DAY 2017**

**EAT, DRINK AND FEEL FAMOUS**



**HOLLYWOOD INSPIRED DINING  
MOVIE MEMORABILIA**

**SPECIAL 2 COURSE  
SET MENU £19.00**

**CLASSIC A LA CARTE DISHES  
BAR DRINKS PLUS BAR BITES**

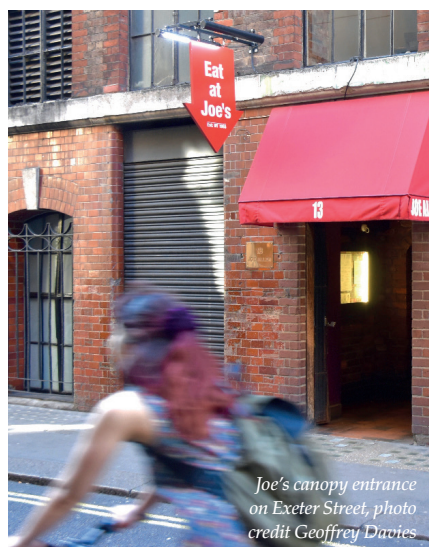


**FOR DETAILS AND TO BOOK CALL  
020 7287 1000 or e-mail  
london-restaurant@planethollywoodintl.com**

**GROUP OF 10 OR MORE?  
BOOK NOW**

**Call 020 7024 8455 or e-mail  
salesuk@planethollywoodintl.com**

**57-60 HAYMARKET SW1Y 4QX  
planethollywoodlondon.com**



*Joe's canopy entrance on Exeter Street, photo credit Geoffrey Davies*

## **EXCLUSIVE READERS OFFER**

**To celebrate it's 40th birthday, Joe Allen's is offering a complimentary 77up Cocktail to all readers who bring a copy (or snap) of American in Britain's summer magazine when dining.**

*Offer valid until 16 July 2017 for restaurant diners only and subject to availability.*