



Grill power

A legendary Mayfair dining spot is back and firing on all cylinders



With three of London's most iconic luxury hotels in its portfolio (Claridge's, The Connaught and The Berkeley), the Maybourne Hotel Group is proof that good things come in small packages. Founded by Belfast-born businessman Paddy McKillen in 2004, the company is now mostly owned by the Qatari royal family, though McKillen still has a substantial investment, personally guiding the development of each of the properties. His tactic has been to appoint a star-studded list of designers, architects and chefs for a number of projects, from a new façade at The Berkeley by RSHP, to Pierre Yovanovitch's recent refresh of Hélène Darroze at The Connaught (shortlisted in this year's Wallpaper* Design Awards).

But there was one project close to McKillen's heart that demanded a particularly deft design touch – the revival of the Connaught's legendary Grill Room. Originally opened in 1955, the restaurant soon became a hotspot for London's great and good, its legendary reputation reinforced by its discretion – no roll-call of notable regulars has ever been made public. The food was the main draw, overseen by the hotel's then-head chef, Michel Bourdin, who, from 1975 to 2000, served »

ABOVE, JOHN HEAH, MIRA NAKASHIMA AND PADDY MCKILLEN, PHOTOGRAPHED AT THE CONNAUGHT GRILL IN JANUARY 2020

LEFT, A POLISHED ZEBRANO WOOD AND HAND-HAMMERED PEWTER COUNTERTOP



'I hope whoever occupies this space becomes aware of a tree that once grew in a Pennsylvania forest'

Instead, a set of low-key American black walnut double doors open to reveal a corridor lined with artwork, by Louise Bourgeois and Le Corbusier, borrowed from McKillen's private collection, and rare wines from the hotel's own cellar displayed in bespoke cabinets.

The sense of anticipation culminates in the intimate 46-seat dining room where, against the hotel's original ornate ceiling mouldings and arches, Heah has created a subtle backdrop, almost as an exhibition space, to showcase the Nakashima pieces. As ever, his skill is apparent in the finer points: concealed lighting by George Sexton Associates; meticulous joinery by furniture makers Longpré; and tactile materials including polished zebrano wood bar countertops (think vintage Mercedes-Benz dashboards), extra-wide Dinesen floorboards, and a hand-hammered pewter dining bar by Rathbanna, a nod to McKillen's father's profession as a metalworker.

American black walnut unites the space, forming the structural elements from the lighting beams to the dining booths, which seemingly float in mid-air. These are lined with textured grey Kvadrat fabric, hairline brushed copper, and buttery-soft Connolly leather seating, which frame Nakashima's 'Frenchman's Cove' tables, elegant 'Conoid' chairs, and some exquisite solid walnut back panels, the wood's natural fissures bound with elegant butterfly joints. 'I love these panels,' says McKillen. 'The way they've been polished, cut and trimmed, the rawness and finesse, it's a contradiction, like the most beautiful velvet.' Nakashima is similarly enthused: 'Solid wood has a vibration of its own. It moves, breathes and lives, it speaks to you. I like these panels because you really get a sense of the tree and I hope whoever occupies this space becomes subliminally aware of a tree that once grew in a Pennsylvania forest.'

It's really only in person that you get a true sense of Nakashima's work. The grace, elegance and irresistible tactility of each piece, along with the obvious skill and meticulous care for every detail. 'For me, the most important thing is that you feel the Nakashima pieces,' says Heah, modestly. 'All I have done is create the space to show them off, almost like a permanent installation.'

All this comes together to form a suitable backdrop for Jean-Georges Vongerichten's menu. From the open kitchen, expect a strong vegetarian offering alongside favourites from Dover sole to roasts (served from the original Grill Room's restored carving trolley), as well as the revival of a daily pie and *oeuf en surprise au Connaught*, served with a twist. 'We're bringing the Grill back to be discovered by a new generation, a modern reinterpretation using craftsmen and chefs of today, but with the same spirit and old-school charm of the legendary Grill Room,' says McKillen. ★ the-connaught.co.uk; nakashimawoodworkers.com

A 'FRENCHMAN'S COVE' TABLE AND 'CONOID' DINING CHAIR, BOTH BY GEORGE NAKASHIMA WOODWORKERS

up classics from roasts to pies, as well as the famous *oeuf en surprise au Connaught*, a boiled egg, wrapped in ham and aspic, topped with truffle and caviar. 'To revive a restaurant with such a great legacy was a decision we didn't take lightly,' says McKillen. 'We wanted to do it right, with the best people, the best design and the best materials, so the restaurant will have a legacy of its own in future years.'

John Heah was tasked with designing the interiors. A low-profile architect with an impressive portfolio, he is no stranger to the Maybourne Group, having already redesigned suites in The Berkeley, as well as the interiors for Jean-Georges at The Connaught. Heah knew the project needed a very particular wow-factor, so he approached Mira Nakashima – architect, furniture maker, woodworker, and daughter of the late George Nakashima – who burnishes her father's legacy as the president and creative director of George Nakashima Woodworkers from her home, studio and workshop in rural Pennsylvania (see W*199).

McKillen, already the proud owner of a Nakashima bench, didn't need much persuasion, especially after visiting Nakashima herself at the compound. 'She took me to an Aladdin's cave of antique timber planks, some hundreds of years old, collected before her father passed,' he enthuses. 'I didn't want to leave; I could have stayed there forever looking at the grains.'

The result is, as McKillen says, 'a dream'. Located on the hotel's ground floor, The Connaught Grill, as it is now called, is as discreet as ever. There is no signage.