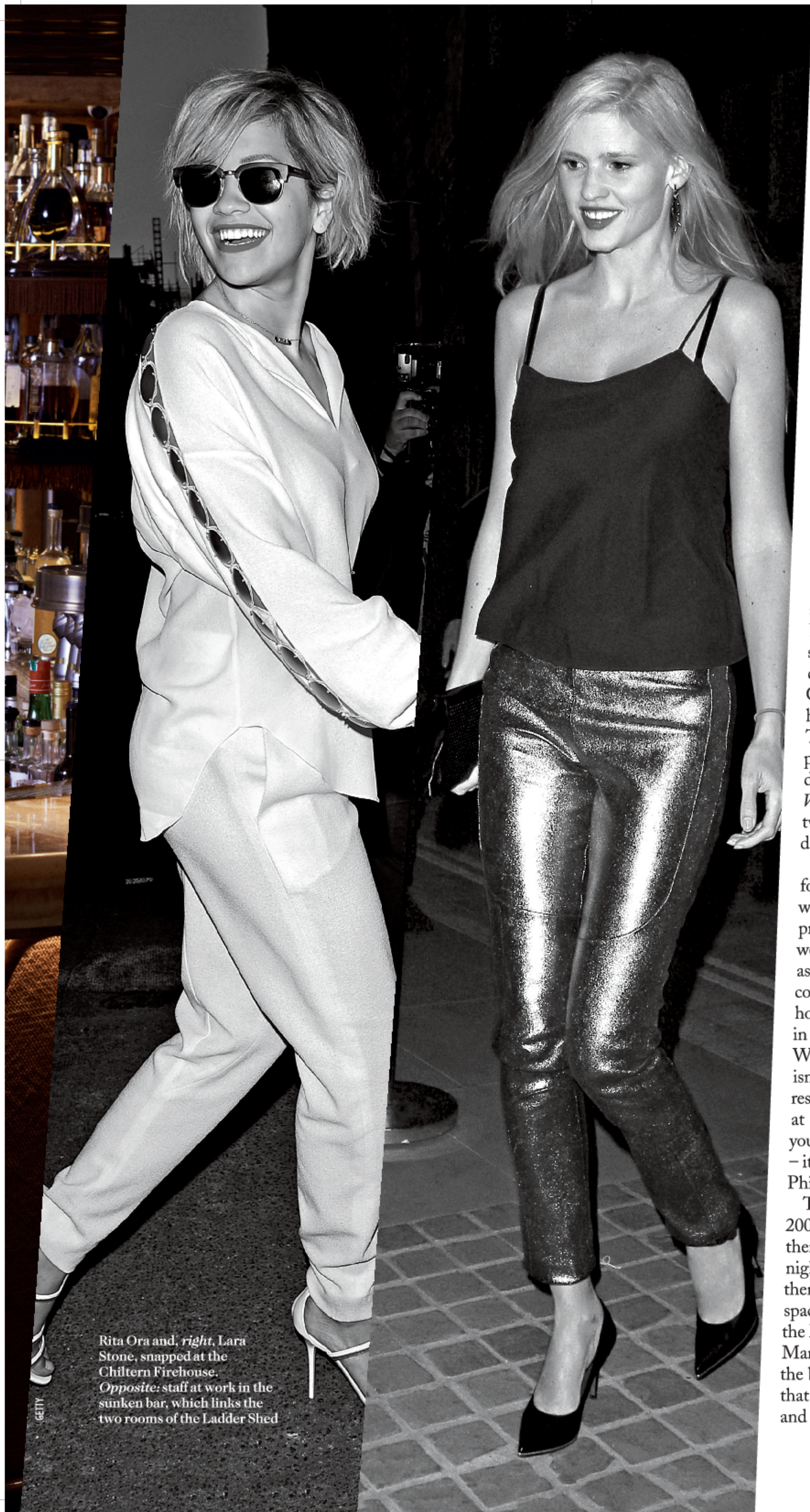




# Fire ESCAPE

A night (and a day) in the life of Chiltern Firehouse, the latest playground for London's beau monde. By *Violet Henderson*.  
Photographs by *Philip Sinden*





Rita Ora and, right, Lara Stone, snapped at the Chiltern Firehouse. Opposite: staff at work in the sunken bar, which links the two rooms of the Ladder Shed

GETTY

It's Wednesday night in Marylebone, cocktail hour, date irrelevant. London's most talked about hotel, restaurant, bar and playground, Chiltern Firehouse, is ablaze. Through its open doors, built back in 1890 to accommodate fire engines, light radiates: golden, peachy and warm, it is the colour of Long Island summer sunsets and burning Christmas embers. Over a throb of indistinguishable conversations, Ella Fitzgerald's alto lilts from the spinning vinyl. On the terrace – a cobbled courtyard space at the front of the building, protected from street view by a wall and a hornbeam hedge – is a good-looking, high-spirited crowd. Kate Moss is among them, cackling with her pal Naomi Campbell, the latter in round sunglasses despite the encroaching dusk. Beside a flickering log fire, Gerard Butler is lounging, his golden hair dishevelled, his white shirt pressed. Through terracotta urns and black-painted tubs, planted by landscape designer and contributor to *American Vogue* Miranda Brooks, waitresses twist and turn in royal-blue jumpsuits designed by Emilia Wickstead.

This March, the Firehouse opened for lunch, dinner and lots of drinks, without fanfare, through a series of private events, at the end of which guests were asked to fill in a questionnaire asking which elements of the experience could be improved upon. Its 26-room hotel is yet younger. It opened for business in September, in time for London Fashion Week, and although business upstairs isn't quite booming on a par with the restaurant – call to reserve a table for three at 8.30pm any night of the week and you're thrown a date for three months later – its first guests included Dakota Johnson, Philippe Starck and Carrie Fisher.

The firehouse was decommissioned in 2005. Mainly offices and storehouses, there was the odd crusty dormitory for night-duty firemen to sleep in, which was then turned into an occasional exhibition space. In 2011 the American hotelier with the Midas touch, André Balazs of Chateau Marmont and Mercer Hotel fame, bought the building with a savvy band of investors that included developer Harry Handelsman and Google's Eric Schmidt. After this >



came many planning applications, followed by a two-and-a-half-year construction process to realise them. Under the direction of Archer Humphryes Architects, the building increased to 30,000sq ft, its original size plus a third. The new wing was built with handmade bricks to look just like the firehouse, with its very same Victorian arches and crenellations, while the terrace was dug two stories down to make space for the heating and cooling systems to feed their forthcoming creation.

But let's get back to the party, after all that is what Chiltern is famed for. And a night spent at the hotel moves from stage to stage, act to act, with all the lightness of touch, wit and irreverence of an Oscar Wilde play, except that at the end – many, many hours past cocktail hour – the plot has a habit of twisting into something a little more rock'n'roll than a comedy of manners. At 9pm the terrace shuts (this hotel has residential neighbours, more of whom later), and the action shifts to the restaurant, a 4,000sq ft room, at the end of which, on a platform, Portuguese chef Nuno Mendes (disciple of Wolfgang Puck, formerly of El Bulli) and his team of 16 deliver an American-inspired menu on French-built stoves.

At full capacity, which is achieved every night, twice a night, this restaurant can accommodate 120 people. All the tables are a little different in size, in look, in purpose. There are tables to be seen at, such as the half-moon red banquette where David and Samantha Cameron dined when they visited in June. There are chef's tables to really eat at – three, in fact – close to the kitchen and the attention of its affable staff; this is where Bono goes when he comes with U2. There is even a "love snug" (as described by Chiltern itself), a compact and kitsch cream-washed private cupboard for two, next to the bar, with its own fireplace, banquette and curtained cubby hole for stealthy drinks orders. But arguably the most cleverly conceived table of all is that to the far left of the entrance, a circular booth skewered by the original fireman's pole, surrounded by an alcove of mirrors. Naomi Campbell fulfilled its implicit promise when, at one of Chiltern's inaugural dinners, she got up on to the table and did an expert dance around it. (Disclaimer: if you're neither a supermodel nor a guest of honour at a

private party here, this is absolutely not what that brass pole is intended for.)

The air at Chiltern is charged with mischief. The tables aren't muffled in white tablecloths, the waiters aren't buttoned up in jackets. Lounging beneath the restaurant, located at the back of the loos, through mirrored doors scrawled "cigarettes and men" for the girls, "women and wine" for the boys, is the now-famous smoking terrace. It is a pleasingly grimy conceit for a pleasingly grimy pursuit. All is painted dissolute black, except for one long, murky mural, the work of American artist José Parlá. On the opposite wall, hanging portentously, are six Hogarth prints of former acts of immorality. Unlike other smoking areas, here, drinking at small round tables is actively encouraged.

Philippe Starck, the designer responsible for making the Royalton in Nineties New York so cool it hurt, is delighted by the Firehouse. "It's highly controlled: when you look at the details, you see everything is designed," he says. Each of the Chiltern customers' reactions tonight was anticipated and debated over long meetings peopled by a creative team of obsessives, chaired by Balazs. Take the rich, heady scent that

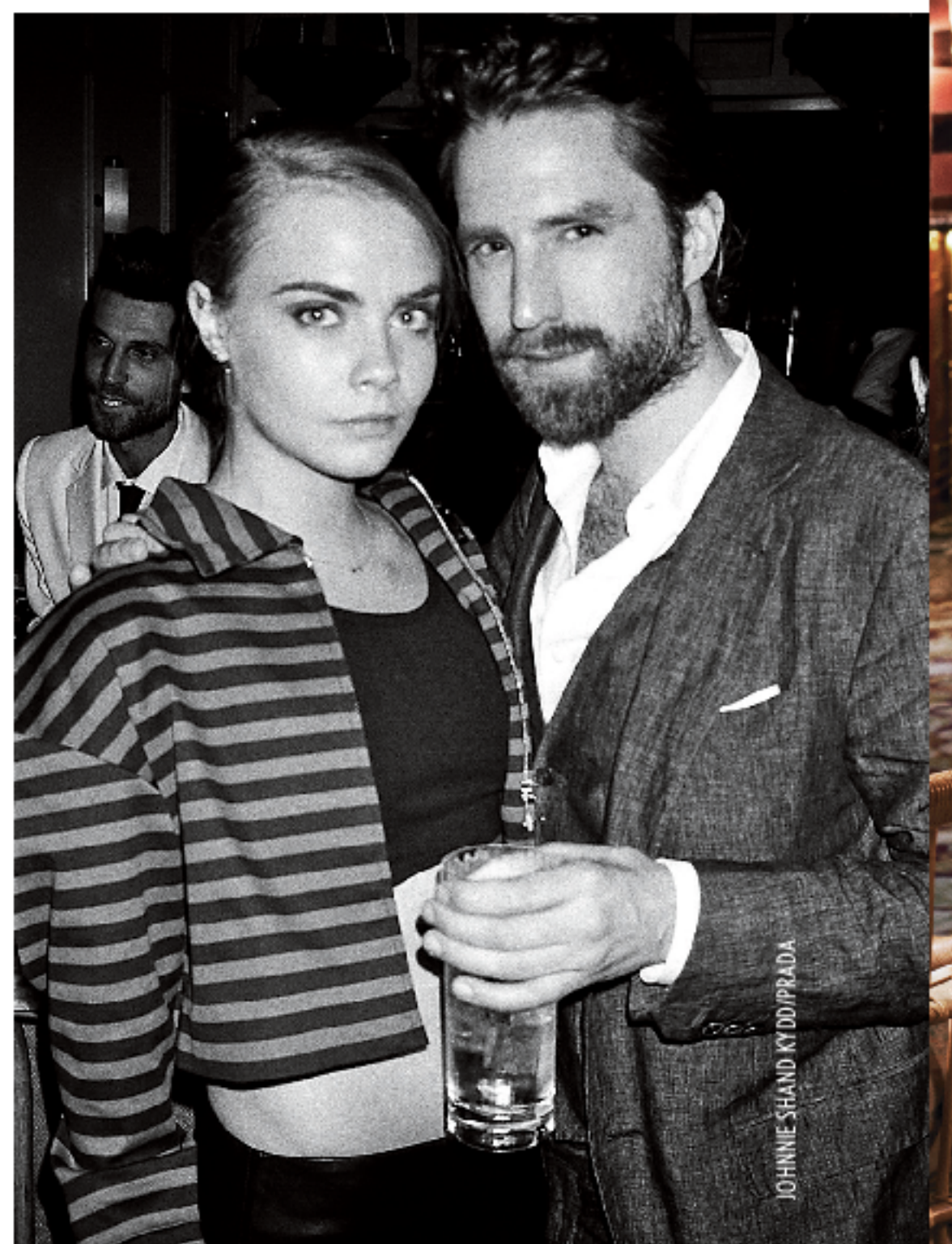
perfumes the corridors; it was a special commission for perfumer Azzi Glasser, intended to foster sensory recognition. "When you breathe in, the scent brings with it all the fun times you have had," explains Clare Barrow, the hotel's creative director. Next time you're there, take a look at the menus. They aren't just perfunctory words on a page but the carefully considered choices of Condé Nast's former editorial director James Truman, plotted with all the attention he once used to lay out magazines. Even the ceilings are not just ceilings. Standing in the restaurant, André points upwards. "When I read *Architectural Digest*, I always turn it upside down, because it amazes me how so many people leave what's above them as big, empty, ugly spaces." But this is a panelled canopy that looks like the underside of an upholstered chair, replicated again and again. "We needed to cover the soundproofing, the pipes and air-conditioning [his personal passion], and as we were discussing how to do it, I kept looking at a fold-up chair," says the hotelier, "and thought, 'Now wouldn't that be fun?'"

But the room everyone wants to get into, located behind the sommelier's passage >

*Most tantalising of all is the message "Dial 0 for anything"*



Above: only hotel guests are allowed in the Ladder Shed, "a slice of Palm Beach seen through a Hollywood lens". Right: Jamie May and Sophie Cannell, two Ladder Shed hostesses, and doorgirl Jess Draper. Below: guests Cara Delevingne and Jack Guinness







Above, from left: Jourdan Dunn, Gala Gordon and Poppy Delevingne. Below left: Arizona Muse. Below: the bedrooms have been decorated with the mindset of a fireman's wife from the Seventies





which now houses a hefty collection of American wine and which was once where the firemen stored their ladders and stabled their horses, is the Ladder Shed. Now it is a sumptuous bar resembling a slice of Palm Beach seen through a Hollywood lens. Officially it's only possible to step inside here (once you've announced yourself and signed the black leather guest book) if you're a hotel resident or their friend. Officially. Winners of the Ladder Shed lottery are given a tongue-in-cheek token, a coloured gambling chip or a playing card of a certain suit, to show if they wish to re-enter after leaving. (It used to be a red chip, until people started arriving ready-loaded with their own.)

Behind the type of curtained screen you'd find in a French brasserie, between two Salvador Dalí artworks of warped clocks (on loan to André from Matthew Freud, his PR guru), this is where Poppy Delevingne took her wedding party after she married; where Larry Gagosian and Jay Jopling drank after the Serpentine Summer Party; and it's also where Bill Clinton got behind the custom-made wooden decks and played a set, kicking off with Billie Holiday. And that's not the only reason everybody wants to get in. The Ladder Shed is really very nice inside. There are deep wicker chairs, custom-made in Asia, and either side of the mahogany-panelled fireplace are cushy banquettes covered in Pierre Frey flame-stitch cashmere. Dominating one very large wall is a yellow rectangle, made from former fireman's hoses, by American artist Theaster Gates. The thick purple and gold floral carpet, which is perfectly mismatched with the Turnell & Gigon floral seats, is a one-off design woven in France, while the polished wooden tables were custom-made in Vietnam.

This is the anti-Met Bar, the salve to the aching hangover of Nineties cool and the gimmicky transience of Noughties pop-ups. It doesn't matter who spins the records here – and anyone can – because the music is never too loud to eclipse conversation. There are no dark corners or shady areas; after all, recognition is a central part of the experience here (tonight Jack Guinness, Mary Charteris, Robbie Furze, Rita Ora and Lily Allen have joined the party). And André, a man devoted to making the world a

better-looking place, keenly subscribes to his hero César Ritz's philosophy that women's faces turn that crucial bit more beautiful beneath a peach glow. Many of Chiltern's lights, such as those hanging over the bar, were custom-made by those east London wizards of illumination, Isometrix. Others, like the gold pineapple lamps on the table opposite, were flea-market buys, found in Florida, made in the Fifties.

"The Ladder Shed was the most difficult room in the Firehouse to decorate," says Olivier Marty of French design company Studio KO, which worked with the Chiltern team and André to style the whole hotel. "It was the only part of the building that wasn't intended for any human habitation. It was just a store, with a very high ceiling height." So, with a stroke of the unexpected, there are three trees in the room reducing the scale: a



Head chef Nuno Mendes in the restaurant's open-plan kitchen

palm and two fig trees opposite. There are white hanging baskets, which aren't in the least bit provincial and, high in the ivory-painted rafters, pots overflow with trailing vines. (Only the ivy is silk; the rest are watered with cans from stepladders every morning.) It's a whimsical contrast to the pink marble bar and its white-jacketed staff whipping up cocktails – the bestseller of which is the Cinq A Sept, a potent vodka, Chambord and pomegranate mix; 40 of these are made a night.

For Naomi Campbell, the Chiltern experience is of "being in my extended living room" – and that's not really down to the decoration. "When I walk around, no one stops me to say, 'Oh my god, you are such and such.' Here I feel safe. And I bump into people who I haven't seen in London for years." Performance artist Marina Abramovic agrees, "There is a

remarkable family dynamic. People come here because they know they can relax and will be protected from the media. No one needs to be too defensive. Very few places manage to allow this type of freedom."

Which brings us back to the proprietor, who is as famous as his guests. "I wanted to create a club that was not a club," he says, in a room full of people tangibly aware of exactly who he is. André's celebrity has been growing since the Eighties, when he began investing in the right nightclubs in New York. He has an easy charm and square-jawed good looks: he counts Jay Z as a business partner, Kanye West and Stephen Fry among his friends, Uma Thurman and Chelsea Handler among his exes. There is social kudos in an André Balazs hotel, and from the way everyone is waving at him, even more in knowing the man. But André is discretion itself. Every

one of his employees is bound by a draconian confidentiality agreement. And in these parts photography is discouraged, although that's really by the by, for the crowd at Chiltern is a little too cool for selfies, too captivated by its own company to be distracted by Instagram.

The scene downstairs may fizz and bubble until the last man standing is sated, but above, all is quiet. With its deep double mattresses, bespoke pillows and Italian-made sheets, this hotel is a surprisingly good place for sleeping. Better still, one imagines, for romantic trysts and even more private

parties. And the hotel has been constructed so that both these activities can be done confidentially; there are three mirrored lifts and a staircase tucked away at the back for alternative routes past reception – although given that's where André displays his personal collection of erotica, the ethos is clearly not prudish.

Inside the rooms, each marked by colourful tiles painted by the artist Tariq, are framed female nudes shot by American photographer Sheila Metzner. The minibars aren't so mini, they're more walk-in cupboards. Most tantalising of all is the message beside the old-fashioned telephone, scrawled in free-hand on custom-made grey Italian paper headed with a bespoke curly red typeface: "Dial 0 for anything." Indeed, the Firehouse offers the sort of personal service that unpacks its guests' luggage and hangs their > 318



clothes in the wardrobes, while the kitchen stays open 24 hours of every day.

Waking up at Chiltern, it's as if the party never happened. The cream walls (which took 15 different trial blends to arrive at) are soothing, the blue carpet serene. Downstairs the Ladder Shed is gleaming, all soft morning light, easy-going jazz riffs and open windows. In the restaurant the crowd has thinned and turned suited; there is coffee and eggs and broadsheets. Even the china is more accessible, no longer the chic block colour of the night before, it's now the floral faded pattern of that very British brand Burleigh, the sort your granny might use to serve tea.

There is an irony that a place where so many details were considered (and so ingeniously – they chose the cutlery blindfold because no one looks at their knife and fork but everyone holds them) sprang into being without paying enough attention to its neighbours. They complained to the press that this was a noisy celebrity hangout that did nothing more for the area than keep it awake until late into the night. The hotel had to subtly reposition itself or risk losing its licence. Now if residents hear late-night noise, they have a number they can call to get an immediate response, and they have their own reservation hotline, just as André's friends like Naomi do.

Twice a month, a community meeting is held in Chiltern's private dining room for troubleshooting. The smoking area has been soundproofed and after 11pm everyone must leave from the back entrance which opens on to a mews, Broadstone Place. But the biggest benefit of all, for Marylebone property owners, will surely be the area's 10 per cent increase in house prices, which residential agency Van Han says "has certainly been influenced" by the Firehouse. In fact, a new block of 44 flats has just gone on the market with the telling name of The Chilterns.

Behind a closed door on the hotel's fourth floor, above a steeply twisting tower, there is a look-out point, once used for spying fires and now, obviously, for very scenic drinks lit by well-positioned lights on crafty dimmers. From its vantage point, slate rooftops ricochet out in waves towards the London Eye, but should you home in a little closer, to the hotel's surrounding streets, you can see where, next year, there'll be a Chiltern pub, bakery and 22 further bedrooms. And what of that pesky office block over the way? It's spreading like wildfire, this Chiltern phenomenon. ■

"We believe in everything in moderation." She grins as she samples their pomegranate and ginger vodka fizz, trying not to smudge her lipstick. "Yum! It's got plenty of alcohol in it. We just keep the sugars low by using sour flavours rather than sweet ones."

The same cannot be said of Mark Hix's Christmas twist on his staple classic, the "Hix Fix" – English sparkling wine with cranberry liqueur in place of the usual morello cherry. Sour it ain't, delicious it very much is. Keith Floyd had a couple at what turned out to be his last meal, at the Hix Oyster & Fish House in Lyme Regis. Later that day he died of a heart attack. He must have died happy.

On the surface of things, everything the girls can do, it seems Hix can do better. As they give everyone some of their smoked salmon to taste – smoked in Stoke Newington by a 6ft 5in Norwegian who plays jazz piano to his fish – Hix nods approvingly before saying that they could have used some of his. "You smoke your own salmon?" Melissa says, incredulously.

"Yeah. Hix-smoked salmon. We smoke it on the roof of Selfridges." Appreciative murmurs all round. "Let's get some up here," he says, looking pointedly at a lackey.

But as the morning goes on, Hix is coaxed away from his iPad, increasingly intrigued by what the sisters are doing. "Let me know if you need any help with anything, girls!" he half-jokes.

Melissa, whose Erdem dress reveals just enough beautiful décolletage, doesn't miss a beat. "Oh great, thanks, Mark. Can you chop the bacon, please?" And they're off. It's like *Ready Steady Cook* with class. Hix chops, tastes and stirs, compares ingredients, decorates cocktails, tells stories. They jape about this summer's Port Eliot festival, where he thinks he drank all the profits of his pop-up restaurant in the Michael Howells-designed Fortnum & Mason tent.

Watching him operate – quietly, gently and with an easy charm – it's easy to see why Hix is one of the most popular men in London. He boasts most of the YBAs as his best friends, and their work adorns his restaurants. "Tracey designed my olive oil and wine labels," he says blithely.

"Do you have your own cookware range?" asks Melissa.

"No," he says, without missing a beat. "I'm not a celebrity chef."

The Hemsley sisters, on the other hand, are well on their way, with a television show and possible branded spiraliser (snazzy vegetable slicer) in the offing. One suspects, watching them in action, that these girls are only just beginning. But how

does their food actually taste? Well, you know what? It's genuinely delicious (except, it has to be said, for the spinach egg nog). The starters, particularly the *bagna càuda*, are full of flavour. The duck (plated up for them with elegant expertise by Hix himself) is cooked to perfection, and nicely offset by the flavour of the broccoli, pea and mint mash and the refreshing crunch of the raw cabbage salad. And the mince pies and Christmas pudding... well, they don't make you want to eat them until your gut is groaning – but that, in a way, is their beauty. Less, in the Hemsley & Hemsley world, is very much more. "And we're big advocates of chewing your food properly," chirps Melissa. "There are no teeth in your tummy so it's important to break down all foods by chewing to access their nutrition. Plus, it takes 20 minutes for your stomach to tell your brain that it's satisfied."

Beyond this advice, it's hard to get much more sense out of the girls, who have now positioned themselves firmly by Hix's truffle-stuffed roast chicken and truffle potatoes. "I can't believe how delicious this is," Jasmine sighs.

"I know!" agrees Melissa. "And have you seen the pavlova?" It's hard to get to – the entire *Vogue* crew is going at the delicious crumbling mess with forks or, failing that, fingers – but the girls do give it a go. Not a lot; just enough to enjoy, but not to destroy.

And what of Hix? He tastes a little bit of everything (even the egg nog), makes the obligatory positive noises, but mainly sticks to his Hix Fix cocktail. He does, however, seem genuinely proud of their combined spread and even suggests putting on a joint dinner club in the coming months. "We aren't dissimilar, you see," beams Melissa. "We both put an emphasis on good-quality produce, and it's got to taste amazing."

Certainly, in a society where we are all in a permanent hurry, eating well and together has become the ultimate luxury. The Hemsley sisters know this just as well as Hix does, and are building their own unique brand – as he has – around it.

"How was that for you, Mark?" Jasmine asks as they begin to pack up.

Hix, momentarily distracted by his phone, doesn't say anything for a minute. Everyone waits with bated breath for his verdict. After what seems like forever, he looks up at the ravaged spread before him and takes another contemplative sip of his cocktail. "Fun," he says with a mischievous wink. "Yeah. That was actually quite good fun." ■

*For all the recipes from Hemsley & Hemsley and Mark Hix, visit [Vogue.co.uk](http://Vogue.co.uk)*