



The Ritz London Circa., 1906 and present



THE RITZ LONDON

PUTTIN' ON THE RITZ



Left and Above: Experience the new pride in British cuisine and produce at The Ritz Restaurant. Circa., 1906 and present.

“Puttin on the Ritz” was a pop song written and published in 1929 by Irving Berlin, and subsequently introduced in 1930 in a musical film by the same name. The title derives from the slang “Putting on the Ritz” which meant ‘to dress very fashionably’ and was inspired, Berlin admitted, “by the swanky Ritz Hotel.” The original version of Berlin’s song recalled the days when well-dressed African American’s from New York City paraded up and down Lenox Avenue “spending every dime for a wonderful time.” The original lyrics were again featured in the 1939 film *Idiot’s Delight* where it was performed by Clark Gable, and again in 1974’s *That’s Entertainment*. The great Fred Astaire made the most memorable reference in the 1946 film *Blue Skies*, though Berlin revised the new lyrics that now applied to affluent whites strutting “up and down Park Avenue.”

Such a homage to the class system was not lost on the famous Swiss Hotelier, Casar Ritz, who after managing some of

the Grand Hotels of Europe, was invited to London to manage the Savoy. By 1897, in fact, he’d put together what he described as “a little army of hotel men for the conquest of London.” The Savoy thrived under Ritz and attracted a distinguished moneyed clientele headed by the Prince of Wales. But when Ritz was dismissed from the Savoy, he retaliated by opening the celebrated Hotel Ritz in Paris the following year, and subsequently the Ritz Hotel in London in 1906: whose reputation almost preceded its opening as the most popular meeting place for the rich and famous. The Prince of Wales and his gang were regulars, of course, as were the bourgeoisie and upper class, all queuing toward Architect, Charles Mewes and Arthur Davis’, re-invention of a full block of stately apartments in Paris. Ritz personally managed the hotel for years, even installing a special bell in the entryway by which the doorman could notify the staff of the impending arrival of royalty. The high standards to which he held his staff and the



Left and Below: The once Grand Ballroom at The Ritz has been transformed into the finest casino this side of Monte Carlo. Circa., 1906 and present.

Opposite Page: The most recent addition to The Ritz, the William Kent Room, is quite possibly the grandest Dining Room in London.



ultimate luxury that he provided his guests had been entirely foreign to Victorian Londoners, and the sensation he caused in the hotel industry precipitated a dramatic shift in the industry’s focus. Thanks to the working middle class, of course, who wanted their share of preferential treatment, Ritz promised each and every guest, if for a day, the experience of a royal household.

I arrived at The Ritz last spring, admittedly, a bit of a “Commoner,” to experience first hand what “Putting on the Ritz” exactly meant. Sadly, as I discover I’m the last to know, there is still a Dress Code at The Ritz Hotel in London. Ruminations of my days in elite New England boarding schools

are evoked in wave-like emotion, as I’m both affronted and intrigued by the same proposition. For men, in particular, the Dress Code requires a jacket and tie while in the Bar, Palm Court and Restaurant. Oh, sure. I was able to check in and scurry up to my room in a new \$280.00 pair of True Religion Jeans. But to move anywhere else in the Hotel was going to require a purchase. As fate would have it, however, the Dress Code had only recently been amended, and graciously allowed me into the Restaurant to enjoy the “breakfast included” option of my Standard Room Rate. Down the Long Gallery I went; peeking into the Ritz Fine Jeweler, the Rivoli Bar, which hinted of adventure on the Orient Express, and the famous



Left and Above: Tea at the Ritz was a tradition born at the Palm Court. Circa., 1906 and present.

Palm Court along the way. Over a century of Tea at the Ritz has been poured in this grandiose alcove and I was humbled not by how gracious the staff were, but how polite and elegant the guests were to me as I schlepped along the corridors. Certainly I didn't belong to this world: where a chorus of glass chandeliers linked by golden garlands thus usher me to the morning's buffet. Glass doors open to an outdoor terrace: with Piccadilly Circus beckoning on one side and Buckingham Palace twinkling at the other. This wasn't a delicate glimpse back in time, I thought, helping myself to both the salmon and champagne. This was an unadulterated return in time and to a place where cucumber sandwiches and polite conversations led to a Grand Conception.

That "the sun never set upon the British Empire" was a statement that not only resonated during Victoria's reign, but also testified to the reach and redemptive quality of the Commonwealth. That Churchill, de Gaulle and Eisenhower

had used the Marie Antionette Suite for Summit Meetings during World War II wasn't lost on me as I pushed my way back through the Long Gallery, up the marble stair, past the 113 utterly unique guest rooms, and into my very own private room. A formal entry welcomes me as I struggle with an oversized Door Key that might have been cut for Shrek. This albatross wasn't intended to be kept in one's pocket, of course, but rather left at the Front Desk both upon leaving and returning to the hotel. Clever, I thought, keeping each guest in continual contact with the hotel's incandescent smile. The furnishings are in the Louis XVI style as well, and I'm struck by the polished grapes, pears, and sparkling water perched near the two-story windows overlooking Green Park. A welcome card from the hotel's staff greets me with warmth and hospitality, though, sadly, I can't help but feel like a guest at a cancelled wedding. Is this all for me, I wondered, just an average American? With desperate housewives and others behav-



Left and Below: The Long Gallery has maintained its integrity with virtual museum quality. Circa., 1906 and present.



Where past and present meet, The Ritz London.

ing badly, it should be noted that Americans, like Cowboys, are considered loud, aggressive and crude. Certainly I didn't look or sound anything like the British Upper Classes. But as I made my way back down the corridors after freshening-up and volleying a pear in my hands to boot, I couldn't help but notice the deference with which I was received along the way. My denying their convention didn't make a dent in a resolve to behave—no, I take that back—to *dwell* in an attitude of complete and unmitigated poise. The William Kent Room, for instance, historically just the house next door, has recently been conjoined to The Ritz London adding yet another component of Regency England to her story. Whether Anna Wintour and Mario Testino are laying out the September Issue of Vogue magazine at this table for twenty, or Queen Elizabeth II is having a private birthday affair, what's clear is that this Dining Room is London's Mecca for taste and style. While descending into the bowels of a hotel might reveal its guts, this particular basement reveals its glory as a once Grand Ballroom. Meticulously restored in the Edwardian Style, the now

private casino rivals any establishment in Monte Carlo and is the hot spot for celebrity couples like Tony Blair and Bill Clinton. A friendship endures beyond their reigns and into a legacy of center left politics for which our two countries are and forever will be joined.

When I returned to my room that night, a linen napkin was spread out on the floor next to my bed. By it, a pair of slippers, and the usual turndown festivities, thus walks me through the policies of retiring, how shall we say, properly. The fruit has been replenished and the water bottles replaced, and I couldn't help but wonder as I stared out the window on that particularly cool spring night whether I'd returned to the past, or, perhaps, actually glimpsed into the future? While every conceivable institution over the past century has "modernized" in an attempt to stay current, it might just be that the King of Hoteliers had it right all along: For the ability to set fashions, rather than merely to follow them, are indeed the gilded centerpiece of a grand and enduring society.

Next time, perhaps, I'll bring some slacks. CHARLATAN