

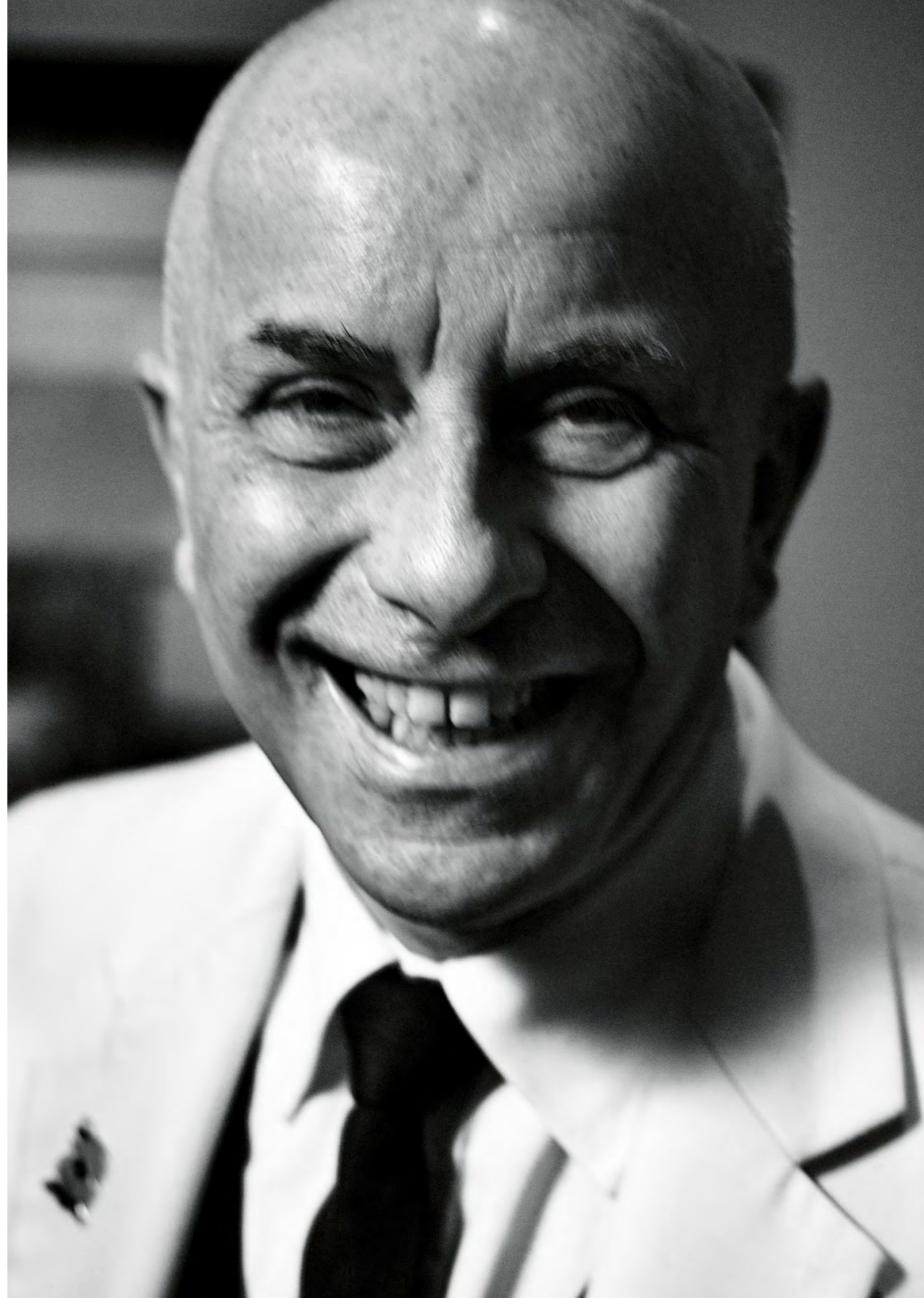
LIQUID LUNCH

AT DUKES BAR, LONDON

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN BALSOM



IF YOU KNOW WHERE TO LOOK, IN A CUL-DE-SAC COURTYARD BEHIND ST JAMES'S PALACE IN LONDON, YOU'LL FIND THE CHARMING COCKTAIL BAR DUKES. IT IS IN THESE SMALL ROOMS THAT IAN FLEMING IS SAID TO HAVE SMOKED CIGARETTES AND FOUND INSPIRATION FOR HIS JAMES BOND NOVELS. OVER THE YEARS, MANY OTHERS HAVE DEVELOPED A TASTE FOR THE HEADY COCKTAILS AND INTIMATE ATMOSPHERE OF THIS HOTEL BAR, BUT AS ALESSANDRO PALAZZI, ITS HEAD BARTENDER, SAYS: WHAT HAPPENS AT DUKES STAYS AT DUKES. JOSEFINE SKOMARS MEETS ALESSANDRO JUST AFTER LUNCH, TO CATCH HIM BEFORE THE BAR FILLS WITH AFTERNOON GUESTS ALL HOPING FOR A TABLE AND A LAUGH WITH THE BARTENDERS. BEFORE SETTLING IN THE ARMCHAIRS AT THE CORNER TABLE, ALESSANDRO WHEELS OUT THE MARTINI TROLLEY AND TALKS THROUGH THE MAKING OF A VESPER MARTINI. THERE'S NO NEED TO KEEP AN EYE ON THE CLOCK, WHETHER IT BE LUNCHTIME OR DINNERTIME, 1908 OR 2018 OUTSIDE: INSIDE DUKES, TIME IS NOT IMPORTANT. THE LIGHT IS DIMMED, THE COCKTAIL IS COLD AND THE CONVERSATION FLOWS FREELY AMONG THE GUESTS, THE BARTENDERS AND WITH ALESSANDRO PALAZZI.

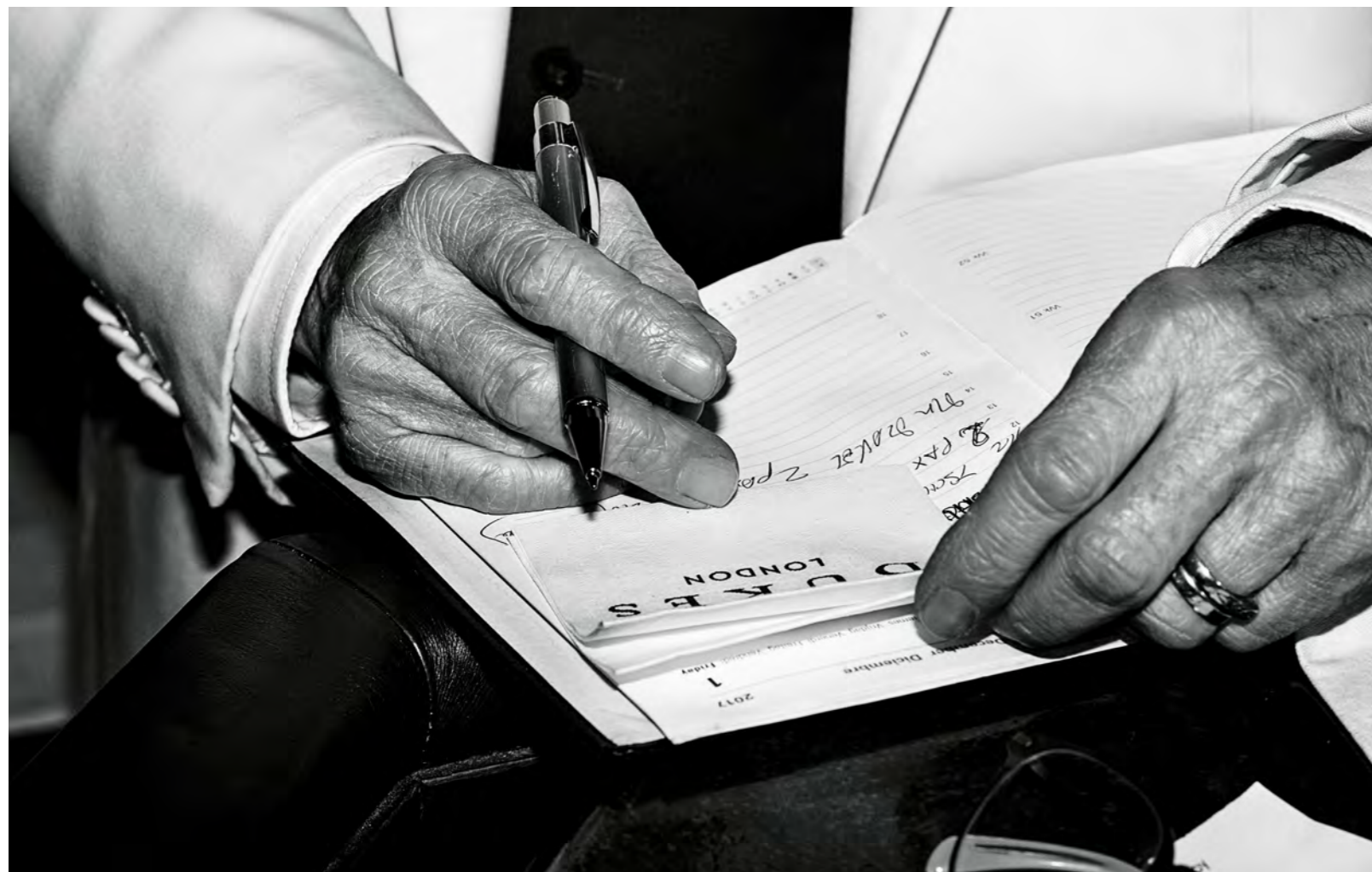




VESPER MARTINI

2 DASHES OF ANGOSTURA BITTERS
15 ML OF SACRED DUKES AMBER
VERMOUTH
70 ML OF NO. 3 GIN
35 ML OF POTOCKI VODKA
TWIST OF ORGANIC ORANGE





ALESSANDRO PALAZZI IN CONVERSATION WITH JOSEFINE SKOMARS

JOSEFINE SKOMARS: Did you always want to become a bartender?

ALESSANDRO PALAZZI: I've been working as a bartender for 47 years, *legally* for 45. As a kid, I loved travelling. I travelled a lot with my mum and I took the train by myself to go to my grandmother's or to go to Rome. Originally I wanted to become a journalist, to be able to travel. Then I ended up working at a hotel the summer before college. During my time there, as a punishment, I was put in the bar.

JOSEFINE: What had you done to deserve that punishment?

ALESSANDRO: I'll tell you what: I wasn't brought up in the typical Italian Catholic way. I was 14 and a half and a bit of a rebel. One day I cursed at a customer in the hotel restaurant. To be put in the bar wasn't a punishment for me, however – I loved it. You see, they talked differently in the bar; in the bar you got to talk to people.

JOSEFINE: Was it fate that made you end up in the bar that day?

ALESSANDRO: I believe things happen and don't happen for a reason. That's my true belief. Next year I'm going to be 60, and the good thing about getting older is that I see things more clearly now – the good things, the bad, the experiences and the mistakes.

JOSEFINE: So, after that summer you decided to go to catering school? Where did that lead you?

ALESSANDRO: I went to catering school in Italy. By the time I finished the education I knew I wanted to become a bartender. Thanks to the Common Market, it was easy to move to Britain for work, and in 1975 I came to London. I started out as a kitchen porter, it was my first job after school and a good life lesson. In the 1980s I went to Paris. It was so glamorous. That was my first experience in a beautiful five-star hotel, the George V [Four Seasons]. I met some

interesting people. I then came back to London and worked for the Savoy Group. After a while I felt the need to travel again. I moved back to Italy to open a business, but it was the wrong city and the wrong path. Again things happened for a reason. I received a phone call from the Ritz [in Paris]. My old boss was working there and had a problem in the bar. Before we finished the phone call I was there. Working at the Ritz was a completely different experience; there was quite a lot of bling-bling. Gianni Versace used to do his fashion shows there and it was overrun with fashion people. Have you seen the film *Prêt-à-Porter* [dir. by Robert Altman, 1994]? It's spot on: behind the scenes it's a bunch of lunatics, the supermodels with their rock star boyfriends, the prima donnas. But it was good, too. Again I met a lot of people. No matter where you are, meeting all the people is the best thing.

JOSEFINE: And a lot of people come to Dukes. Guests queue in the lobby of the hotel waiting for tables every day of the week?

ALESSANDRO: Yes. Because once you get a table, it is yours, we don't give you a timetable. The drink is potent and not something you drink in a hurry. There's no need to rush – that's the philosophy I brought to Dukes.

JOSEFINE: You can feel the difference in atmosphere that this policy brings, too: it's almost like time stands still here.

ALESSANDRO: We're lucky in terms of location. We're in a courtyard, in a historical place. When you walk in here you already feel that atmosphere. To get here you've made a journey – you don't just happen to walk in, it's a destination. We're in central London, but we could be in the countryside. It's quiet here; if you want noise you go to Piccadilly. It's not fancy, it's not bling-bling. I don't know what kind of day they

might have had before coming here but I see people leave with a smile. I usually say, with the martini I'm like a legalised drug-dealer *(laughing)*.

JOSEFINE: Yes, the Dukes martini has a reputation of being the best martini in the world. What makes it so good?

ALESSANDRO: It's the best because of the temperature: it has got to be very cold. *(At Dukes temperature is tended to carefully. During our conversation Alessandro pours my half-drunk Vesper Martini into a new glass straight from the freezer)* And also because of the ingredients. Have you been to Italy? Do you like the food?

JOSEFINE: I do!

ALESSANDRO: It's because it's simple. It's because of the good ingredients. So, there you are!

JOSEFINE: And your team is all Italian too?

ALESSANDRO: Yes, in the bar it's all about teamwork and I like having passionate people in my team. We're only six bartenders here. You have Maurizio [Schiavone], Enrico [Chiappini], Antonino [Ilo Iacono], Domenico [Cancelli] and Maria [Antoinetta Verano], the first woman to work in this bar. It used to be very manly here – that's how this area was in the 1930s and 1940s. It's like with the clubs, they didn't accept women. I never understood why.

JOSEFINE: You've changed the policy of the bar in many ways but you've decided to keep the classic design.

ALESSANDRO: Yes, it's the same. That's what people like!

JOSEFINE: What about the historical building, are there any connections with Spencer House or Buckingham Palace just around the corner? Who is the Duke?

ALESSANDRO: I don't know who the Duke was, but this used to be a private house. During the reign of Charles II [1630–85] the area around St James's Palace

got fashionable. Back then the courtyard around here led to the house of the Duchess of Cleveland, one of the King's mistresses. She had three sons: the dukes of Cleveland, Grafton and Northumberland. There were also brothels on Jermyn Street at some point. So, this area was for the crazy guys. But the old buildings were demolished in 1885 and replaced with this building, which became Dukes in 1908. It was only a small hotel then with 40 beds. The building next door, which is now also part of the hotel, used to be privately owned flats where men from noble families, politics and the army lived. Business was done in the club here, and you see, this is probably why Ian Fleming came here. But it was completely different then. Only the rich and powerful drank cocktails. The atmosphere was different, London was different.

JOSEFINE: And now, Dukes is a welcoming oasis of sorts?

ALESSANDRO: Yes, it is, anyone who walks in is treated the same way. People ask if we have a lot of celebrity guests – celebrity, I hate that word! The drink is my main celebrity. And once our guests have the drink, they are all celebrities. I've been here for 10 years. We have a lot of regular costumers but it's not a club. I want to create the atmosphere of a club, without the snobbish elements. When I took over it was very strict. You had to have a jacket and tie, you know... I took away all that nonsense. As long as you don't appear in shorts and flip flops. My best achievement here together with the team is to have brought people from all over the world to the bar, people from different cultures and industries who enjoy what we do. I get to travel here in the bar, without queuing at security at the airport. I get paid to party every night!

JOSEFINE: It is also an art, curating an evening at

Dukes. There are only a handful of tables in each room and you won't be able to accommodate every guest arriving.

ALESSANDRO: To make the cocktail is the easy thing. I always say, to call a drink a cocktail you need three ingredients, and the same goes for a bartender: you need to be diplomatic, acrobatic and charismatic. Once you get these three things together, bingo, you're a bartender.

JOSEFINE: I've seen you greeting and talking to all your guests this afternoon. It's a lot about conversation.

ALESSANDRO: It starts with the trolley. There's already contact there. The action is on the floor, because we do the martinis by the table in front of you. It's a slow pace. Sometimes there comes a guest who like a quick drink – well, they're in the wrong place.

JOSEFINE: What's the story behind this famous trolley?

ALESSANDRO: My friend made this one specially. I asked him to make it look like it did in the old days when they used a cocktail trolley here, and also to make it so that I could easily go around the tables throughout in the bar. Dukes opened in 1908 and that's also the year Ian Fleming was born, so that's why we engraved that year on the trolley. The frozen bottles we keep on the trolley make marks that add to the vintage look. Sometimes when people ask to buy the trolley I tell them it's historic and costs £20,000. That's the official story and they believe me *(laughs)*.

JOSEFINE: Both Dukes and you have a lot of stories to tell.

ALESSANDRO: And all the drinks I've created with my team have their stories. For example *(showing me the menu)*, Kissy Suzuki is named after the Bond girl in *You Only Live Twice* and is made using gin by my friends in Kyoto. I named one drink Evensong. It's an evening prayer, like Vespers. I

make Evensong with Belvedere Vodka. The brand sponsored the latest Bond movie, *Spectre*, but the company also made a special edition [bottle] with a South African artist [Esther Mahlangu] and donated half of the profits to help fight AIDS. I liked that idea. Then we have Room 39, named after the room Mr. Fleming worked in at the Naval Intelligence Division, and Violet, which is named after Ian Fleming's housekeeper at his house Goldeneye in Jamaica. There's not much about Mr. Bond in the end, it's all about Mr. Fleming. Who cares about Bond? *(Laughing)*

JOSEFINE: In *Casino Royale*, the first Bond novel Ian Fleming wrote, Bond creates his own martini. He names the drink after the first Bond girl, Vesper Lynd. Is that the drink on your menu?

ALESSANDRO: The Vesper martini from *Casino Royale* can't be made today as one of the ingredients, Kina Lillet, is no longer produced. We have made our own Vesper recipe, inspired by the original Vesper Lynd, Krystyna [Skarbek, later Christina Granville]. She was the Polish agent who is said to have been Winston Churchill's favourite spy. At the time when Mr. Fleming wrote *Casino Royale* you would never have mixed vodka and gin in the same drink. It showed the unconventional ways of Mr. Bond, and might have been a suggestion of the two faces of double-agent Vesper Lynd. So, we mix Polish vodka with British gin. The gin we use is from Berry Bros. & Rudd at 3 St James's Street where their shop has been since 1698, the days of the original Duke.

JOSEFINE: Have you yourself always loved martinis?

ALESSANDRO: Ian Fleming made the martini famous with Bond, and the martini became the symbol of Dukes during the time of Gilberto Preti [former head bartender at Dukes]. Myself, I love every cocktail! ☺