

The Loire lover behind RSJ

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My call to book a table to take two wine-loving friends to RSJ, a restaurant close to London's National Theatre which has for the past 26 years commanded a strong following for good food and the best wines of the Loire valley, resulted in a series of surprises.

The only pleasant one was that my call was answered by the restaurant's founder, the usually ebullient Nigel Wilkinson, who for the very first time I had ever spoken to him sounded thoroughly miserable. Wilkinson quickly explained the reason for his unhappiness, "We had just got over our usually quiet August, and September was looking really good when we had a fire in the kitchen. Fat and stock had mixed together on the solid top cooker and although the chef dabbed out the initial flames it caught alight again and soon the flames were up in the extract. I ran down as soon as I saw the smoke and I can honestly say I have never been so scared in my life! We managed to get the 20 odd customers out safely and the fire brigade were wonderful but the past four weeks have been awful. I wouldn't recommend something like this even if your business were in trouble."

But this temporary hiatus did allow me to catch up with Wilkinson at Arbutus near Soho Square whose chef/ proprietor Anthony Demetre had coincidentally cooked at RSJ 'years ago', Wilkinson confessed, and whom he subsequently described as 'an excellent chef'. As he looked over the menu Wilkinson explained that perhaps the only benefit of this enforced rest had been the opportunity to take his staff out to check on the competition. It made them realise quite how many new restaurants there now are. "When I opened RSJ in March 1980 there were just two restaurants along the South Bank between Westminster and Tower Bridges," he added with a wry smile. Now there are scores.

But before learning how Wilkinson has steered RSJ (named after the rolled steel joints needed to convert a former 19th century stables into his 80 seater restaurant) through this unusually long period, I wanted to know how he had managed to avoid the two major pitfalls of any restaurateur's life, a broken marriage and too close a relationship with the bottle.

"Well, I am 56 and I am happily married but I only got married five years ago. I was what they call a late starter but it was undoubtedly because working seven days a week left me little time for anything outside the restaurant. And when I did get married it was to someone who had worked with me as a restaurant manager so she knew what she was letting herself in for. As for the drink, it's very simple. Even though I may have to taste wine for the business I never drink at lunchtime, I have found that that is the only way of maintaining my enjoyment for this business which I still love. It's the buzz and the excitement of being with people which are the biggest attractions and what keeps restaurateurs going. Rather like an old crooner, I hope to be still going when I am 70."

This will be 40 years on from when Wilkinson accumulated the £18,000 from working in hotels in Switzerland and a stint in the Merchant Navy which, together with a bank loan for £7,500, was enough to open a restaurant in those days. Today, the restaurant has a turnover of a million pounds and while in good years it can generate annual profits of £25,000 it has, most importantly, provided Wilkinson with what he describes as 'a very good living' after the initial few years without a salary. "But," he added, "I think it is one of my failings that I don't keep a close enough eye on the bottom line because that is what allows for the continuous innovation that allows any restaurateur to bring in new waves of customers but never, ever to lose sight of the importance of your regulars."

Wilkinson recalled his two forays to expand his restaurant business with mixed emotions. "In the mid-1980's we opened a second restaurant not far away and although it was well received critically I was simply not hard-nosed enough to run the two businesses. They say that opening your second restaurant is always the most difficult and I found that I simply was not able to concentrate on either set of customers as I would have liked. Then in the 1990's we opened a café on the corner of Coin Street which was hugely popular with queues right down the street. But unfortunately we had set up a production kitchen in railway arches nearby that was far too elaborate. The costs involved were just too big for the company to bear and eventually we had to close."

But if these memories hurt there is no disguising the happiness with which Wilkinson recalls what continues to be his most particular contribution as a London restaurateur, his involvement with some of the most distinctive wine producers from the Loire. "It was not long after the restaurant opened and a fishing journalist friend asked me to join him on a weekend trip. I didn't know much about wine at the time but the timing was fortuitous because a lot of younger winemakers were in the process of taking over the vineyards from their fathers and beginning to realise that they didn't have to be mediocre any longer. They could produce something special."

And with the arrival of a gleaming fillet of bream with risotto and clams and our second bottle of mineral water Wilkinson began to explain why this association with the Loire has been so crucial both personally and professionally. "I simply don't know where we would be without it. Obviously, today it is important now that there are so many restaurants in this city to occupy a particular niche but that one trip has provided me with the most fantastic interest ever since. Running a restaurant is nowhere near as glamorous as eating in one but the two major attractions for any restaurateur are the buzz and the excitement of the place and the opportunity to handle fabulous produce. I think that just as there are now far more individuals committed to producing great food, there are even more attractions for a nascent restaurateur. But when I started wine was the most obvious way to get close to the producers. For me, it is wonderful to have a list where I know all the producers and the opportunity to know everything about their wines."

For several years Wilkinson has run a separate wine company alongside the restaurant but fears that its future may be limited. "It not only ties up capital but today I find I am running out of customers. I used to sell to a lot of like-minded independent restaurateurs but there are very few of us left today. Most restaurants now belong to chains or groups and they tend to buy their wines centrally."

Looking at his watch, a smile returned to Wilkinson's face. "If you'll excuse me I have to go. I'm meeting Ted Beckham, David's father, later this afternoon, as he has maintained the gas cookers in my restaurant for the last 20 years or more. If he is happy with their condition and the builders keep to their schedule I hope to be open on Saturday night for a 70th birthday party that has been booked for months."

RSJ 33 Coin Street, London SE1 020-7928 4554, www.rsj.uk.com.

Long running restaurants

London: Rebecca Mascherenas's **Sonny's**, more than 20 years in Barnes, SW13, (0208-748 0393); **Le Caprice** currently celebrating its 25th birthday in Mayfair, (020-7629 2239).

Paris: **Taillevent**, 60 years old this year and still run by the Vrinat family, 00 33 1 44 95 15 01.

New York: **Chanterelle**, opened in 1979 by David and Karen Waltuck, 001- 212- 966 6960.
This article also appears in the *Financial Times*.