

A new Hibiscus flowers

22 Dec 2007 by Nick Lander/FT

Standing between the wine cellar and the private dining room in the small lobby in the basement of Hibiscus, the restaurant which Claire and Claude Bosi have just transferred from Ludlow, Shropshire, to London's West End, it is possible to appreciate just why people fall for this business.

The buzz of happy customers gently wafts down the stairs from the dining room above. This is occasionally punctuated by the odd high pitched laugh but the overall sound is one of people having a good time, eating and drinking as they talk to their friends. Unfortunately, this is not something that can be bottled but it is the lifeblood of the industry and something that once experienced is very hard to turn your back on, as I know too well.

That Claude should be in this position is not surprising. His parents owned a bistro in Lyons, south east France, serving *casse-croute* and *plats du jour*. It was, he proudly confessed, 'a very family affair'. Having made his way through some of the best kitchens in Paris, he decided to come to England for six months to learn English before travelling the world and so he accepted a job via a recruitment agency as *sous-chef* at Overton Grange Hotel near Ludlow.

What was not in the script was that one night he would go for dinner to The Merchant House, then run by Shaun and Anja Hill and their one assistant, Claire. Claude and Claire met, fell in love and in May 2000 Hibiscus was born.

Over the next seven years the Bosis garnered a great deal of media attention as Ludlow developed a justifiable reputation as a charming, historic town in which one could eat very well. They were big fish in a small pool. Why, I wondered, had they wanted to move?

"The major reason was fear of stagnation. The seven years we spent there really flew by," Claire explained "but it was time for a new challenge. Also we have a two year old daughter and the restaurant we had created there depended on us both being there all the time. We needed to build an organisation that was still small but could cope with my occasional absence."

They were encouraged in this process by the advances of three City businessmen who offered to back them if they came to London. "We laughed at them initially," Claire confessed, "but then we began to take their offer seriously. We were fortunate in that one specialised in property and was incredibly helpful with the details of the lease. And by taking over what was the shell and core of a new redevelopment we managed to avoid the hefty premiums that restaurants sites invariably carry." One million pounds later a new Hibiscus flowered.

What is perhaps most distinctive about their new restaurant is not just how much of their approach to looking after their customers the Bosis have transferred but also how many different aspects of Shropshire they have brought with them.

Five, out of a total of ten, in the kitchen brigade have followed them, as have two in the restaurant, including a most assiduous sommelier. They chose Davies + Baron as their designers despite their having no previous restaurant experience because they were the only one of the design firms they approached who took the trouble to travel up to eat in their former restaurant. And once Claire had given her list of what was not to be in the design - no purple, chocolate, leather or anything that felt corporate - they began to embellish what is a very friendly dining room with layers of Shropshire. The tactile bill holders and wine list were made there as were the teapots and the woodwork within the restaurant.

Shropshire also provides a great deal of their weekly purchases, most notably the venison, veal and suckling pig as well as their butter, which comes from a herd of 100 Jersey cattle tended by someone Claude refers to simply as 'Morris the Butter Man.'

In trying to pit his culinary talents against the best in London, Claude starts with one great advantage, Claire. She is unquestionably a very fine restaurant manageress who manages to be unflappable and courteous simultaneously and equally capable of moving from dealing with an awkward table to chivvying up her staff without breaking her smile. She is such a strong presence that I noticed on a couple of occasions that the staff seem to lose their focus when she is not in the room.

The transition has been more difficult for Claude although his talent is obvious. I never ate at their original site and none of the four meals in London has disappointed but it is difficult to categorise his particular style of cooking. One might say that it is first class ingredients embellished by high technique and a propensity to take risks that may not be to everyone's taste.

Several dishes have really impressed. A terrine of chicken and eel was a stunning combination as was the even more surprising juxtaposition of croquettes of lambs' sweetbreads with a tartare of oysters. Bosi makes vension, pear and smoked chocolate sauce and a rack of veal with a parsley root and cumin puree work equally well, particularly with a creamy potato and chestnut gratin that I am sure his parents would approve of, although the combinations he chooses for his fish dishes don't seem to be as exciting. There is a deft touch in the pastry section, particularly over the warm hazelnut *mille feuilles* and the chocolate tart with Indonesian basil ice cream.

For the moment I think Claude is trying too hard. There seems to be one ingredient too many on each dish which tends to mask the overall freshness of all that he is trying to achieve. They quite openly admit that the move to London has been more difficult than they had anticipated and that they were totally unprepared for one unforgivable aspect of London restaurant life, the number of cancellations they have received because customers have booked two or three different restaurants on the same night and will only cancel the ones they don't want to eat in at the very last moment.

"Last week we had 134 cancellations and we served 450 customers in total," Claude explained. "Fortunately, in this pre-Christmas period we managed to fill them all but this has meant that we have had to start taking credit card numbers for dinner reservations. It has very effectively put an end to this practice of cancelling at short notice but I am not happy with the course of action we have had to take to combat something we have never encountered before."

Such, sadly, are the facts of life of restaurant life in the capital. Once Bosi tones his menu down somewhat and realises he can hold his own with the best, then Ludlow's loss will definitely be London's gain.

Hibiscus, 25 Maddox Street, London W1, 020-7629 2999. Open Monday- Friday only. Set lunch £25 (three courses), set dinner £55.
www.hibiscusrestaurant.co.uk/about.htm