

Wake up, Parisian restaurateurs

11 Jul 2009 by Nick Lander/ FT

Paris currently generates one immediate question among those who write about restaurants: is it still interesting?

This scepticism is based on the premise that Paris as a restaurant destination has been overtaken not just by New York and London but also by considerably smaller cities such as San Sebastian, Barcelona, San Francisco and Sydney.

My response is an immediate 'yes', but I would replace this with another question: why are Paris's restaurants so frustrating?

This feeling is inspired by my attempts to plan visits to restaurants when it is most convenient for me, ie over the weekend or, at a stretch, on Monday lunchtime, only to find them firmly closed.

Perusing any guide, or going online to any particular restaurant's website, invariably produces the same infuriating conclusion: that they are closed on Saturday and Sunday, or Sunday and Monday, or in the case of Chez Michel, my favourite restaurant close to the Gare du Nord, closed Saturday, Sunday and Monday lunch. I am left with the distinct impression that Paris's restaurateurs simply don't appreciate my custom.

Certainly, one reason that the grander restaurants used to give for closing at the weekend - because that was when their regular clientele went away to the country - is no longer valid. Young Parisians don't seem to follow this practice and the number of those who do leave Paris has for a long time been exceeded by those who flood in from outside, keen to experience some of the world's top restaurants. Nor is the claim that many restaurateurs could afford to close at the weekends, as well as for the whole of August, because they operated cash- only businesses with all the financial comfort that brought, valid any longer.

And individual restaurateurs are no longer under any binding legal or social restrictions that prevent them from operating more flexible opening hours. The strictures of the 35-hour week have been lifted and the only obligation any Parisian restaurateur must still adhere to is to give his staff three shifts off in sequence ie one whole day followed by a lunch or an evening followed by a whole day.

This explains the block closures but not why so many choose to enforce them at a time that suits them rather than their customers. I simply cannot believe that Parisian restaurants sell more (highly profitable) wine on a weekday lunchtime than on a Saturday night when so many remain resolutely closed.

I came across a further example of this old- fashioned mentality when we met some Australian friends, including Neil Perry, Sydney's best- known chef, at **L'Ambassade d'Auvergne** (pictured), one of a what seemed like a handful of restaurants open for Saturday lunch.

Delayed by a cloudburst, we arrived just before the witching hour of 2pm to be greeted by an otherwise genial maitre d' who anxiously asked us to place our order immediately as the kitchen was about to close. When he finally arrived, Perry's response was characteristically terse. 'My chefs would really love me,' he said, 'if I said they could close and go home at 2 o'clock.' Their 30- euro regional menu will, however, delight any meat- eating trencherman.

There are signs of change, however. When he left London seven years ago to open **The Rose Bakery** with his wife, Jean- Charles Carrarini told me that opening on Sundays would be the cornerstone of his business model and the continual queues outside this quirky café which incorporates the best of London, Paris and Berkeley are proof to the demand he has generated by giving the customers what they want when they want it.

This lesson has not been lost on the cosmopolitan Costes brothers who have opened the **Hotel Amour** just round the corner with a chic bar and café on the ground floor that stretches into a verdant courtyard.

The Sunday brunch menu is easy and non- confrontational. Scrambled eggs; salads; burgers and pasta with a smattering of organic ingredients. It is just a shame that this cannot apparently be delivered with precision. The advertised broad beans were completely missing from one salad and the macaroni cheese not heated through. But it does provide a suitable location for watching young Parisians at play, from one table showing off engagement rings to many more feeding small children.

Happily, there are exceptions to every rule and Mathieu Buffet and his partner Charlotte Dupes have created one with their charming **Miroir** restaurant, located in the shadow of Sacre Coeur on the flanks of Montmartre, open for dinner on Saturday and Sunday brunch but closed Sunday evening and Monday.

The restaurant is a narrow room whose physical charms they have cleverly mitigated by hanging six large mirrors. Opposite the bar are some modern prints and cases of wine, testimony to Mathieu's passion and his previous career working under sommelier David Ridgway at La Tour d'Argent.

Miroir is, however, very different. A blackboard menu with six choices at each course; elegant glassware; but simple tables dressed only with good quality linen napkins. Most pleasingly, at 32 euros for three courses, the kitchen under Sebastien Guénard delivers a range of dishes with strong, clear flavours: a thick, cool shellfish bisque with chives; a particularly solid version of gazpacho that incorporated a thick slice of marinated salmon; and main courses, lamb, veal, tuna and cod that shared the plate with fresh, vibrant vegetables - unusual for Paris.

And on Sunday evening there is, happily, always **Benoît**, close to the recently refurbished Tour St- Jacques, which Parisians and tourists fall on with equal pleasure although the management's policy is to keep them apart, the former seated in the second room, the latter in the first.

Both are equally elegant - the restaurant opened in 1912 - and although our meal included one disappointingly dry duck main course, it included two classic dishes. A first course of a copper cassole of warm peas, broad beans, asparagus and herbs, and a dessert of pistachio ice cream topped with halved cherries, kirsch and fresh white almonds.

But best of all at 10.30pm on a Sunday was the sight and sound of customers having a good time. Will more Parisian chefs and restaurateurs, now with the advantage of the reduced sales tax that came into effect on 1 Jul, please take note?

L'Ambassade d'Auvergne www.ambassade-auvergne.com
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Hotel Amour www.hotelamourparis.fr
Miroir, 94, rue des Martyrs, 75018 01.46.06.50.73
Benoît www.alain-ducasse.com