

Eating in Beaune

26 Sep 2009 by Nick Lander/ FT

Beaune, the best-preserved town in Burgundy in eastern France, is the country's fifth most visited city and it is easy to see its attractions. The ramparts; the narrow, cobbled streets; and the magnificently tiled roofs of its many medieval buildings continue to give the illusion that it is still a dukedom.

Its restaurants, however, have been changing much more quickly - although what is so different now, as the city embarks on the busiest three months of the year between the start of the wine harvest and the famous Hospices de Beaune charity auction in November, is not immediately obvious.

Because the family holdings in the surrounding vineyards are so small, and quality so crucial, the grapes still have to be picked by hand rather than by machine and the grape pickers need to be fed. To attract the best pickers for this back-breaking labour, the vignerons have to feed them well. As a result, they call in the services of the nearby restaurateurs, who become traiteurs, or outside caterers, during the harvest.

Yet despite Beaune's seemingly unchanging architecture, it is now home to two restaurants that have emerged from very different and most improbable settings.

Bistro de L'Hôtel, just off the main Place Carnot, was until three years ago a clothes store, while the elegant, sunny terrace between the bistro and the associated Hôtel de Beaune (pictured) was just a dumping ground. Bissoh meanwhile, a Japanese restaurant 10 minutes' walk away, is located in the former warehouse of a wine and spirit merchant but the old, dark timber interior, as well as the authentic cooking, imbue it with a sense of downtown Kyoto.

How Johan Bjorklund and his partner, Margie Thybulle, came to be the welcoming personalities behind Bistro de L'Hôtel is a tale of two complicated personal lives and careers. But the result is somewhere that provides great pleasure and a lesson for the many French restaurateurs whose approach to their customers remains too formal and inflexible.

Bjorklund trained as a chef in his native Stockholm and initially came to Paris in 1980 to cook for the Swedish ambassador. A subsequent visit to Burgundy convinced him to abandon his immediate dream of opening a restaurant and he became a wine merchant travelling between Burgundy, London and New York, where he had opened a wine store.

This wine store just happened to be next to a gourmet store run by Thybulle, a striking looking woman of Haitian descent who, even after four years in France, has not lost her Washington Heights accent. Although both were married at the time, they fell in love and decided to move to Beaune, where several years beforehand Bjorklund had cleverly bought what were the offices of a wine company and converted them into the boutique Hôtel de Beaune. The bistro is the symbol of their new life together.

And the bistro is great fun, although it is difficult to say whether the food is more engaging than watching Bjorklund and Thybulle working alongside one another.

The long menu reflects his classic training - soups, salads, egg dishes, pasta, fish and meat - and incorporates the local specialities such as a whole Bresse chicken, ribs of Charolais beef and local veal as well as a whole sea bass cooked with olive oil, lemon and sea salt, all of which are cooked for two and carved at the table.

Happily, the aromas of these dishes on nearby tables reached ours as we enjoyed deep fried artichoke and squid; an excellent version of Vietnamese langoustine spring rolls with a sweet and sour dipping sauce; a plump fillet of veal with girolle mushrooms; and veal kidneys with a green peppercorn sauce. And then there was the spectacle of three different trays of desserts, baked that afternoon, brought to our table.

During dinner, after Thybulle had responded to our indecisiveness over the menu with the consoling phrase 'Do take your time', I watched Bjorklund, dressed in jeans, a white jacket and apron, welcome guests, wipe down tables, stand on the stairs overlooking the terrace watching his customers, and finally, at 10.30pm, carry trays of food to the party in the private room upstairs.

The following morning I asked him how exactly he saw his role in the bistro. His response went to the heart of what so many chefs ought to be doing today.

'When we opened here in May 2007, I wanted a relaxed place, where naturally I would be the chef. Hence the open kitchen with stools for customers to sit and look, the music, the black and white photos on the walls of chefs I admire from around the world, and the relatively simple food based on the best ingredients. And although I was almost 50 it felt good finally to be a chef in my own restaurant. I realised that if I had done this when I was younger, I would have been trying too hard, putting too many ingredients on the plate.

But after a year the kitchen started to attract young French chefs whom I could rely on, while it was increasingly difficult to recruit young managers who had the relaxed approach to customers that I wanted. So I started to work in the restaurant and so far it seems to work', he added, smiling at his partner.

His final comment - that he works harder today but feels less tired and has fewer headaches than in the past - brought a response from Thybulle also indicative of many restaurateurs heavily dependent on the tourist trade at the moment, 'and let's hope', she added, 'we make some money one day'.

Beaune's attractions as a centre of fine wine along easily accessible travel routes have also been important factors in the decision of chef Mikihito Sawahata and his partner, Sachiko, who collates the wine and sake list, to settle here to open Bissoh after careers as peripatetic as Bjorklund and Thybulle's.

Bissoh roughly translates into 'to thank people who work hard and support us'. And as the restaurant celebrates its fifth birthday, its charms are obvious. Sawahata produces the kind of food that strikes just the right balance between being comforting and exciting, while Sachiko has produced a sake and wine list that includes so many of the less well known wines from Burgundy at such reasonable prices that Bissoh has become a particular favourite for many of the region's younger generation of winemakers.

Bistro de L'Hôtel, www.lhoteldebeaune.com

Bissoh, www.bissoh.com