

Racine - the right side of menus

10 Oct 2009 by Nick Lander/ FT

'Intrigued' was Henry Harris's immediate response to my initial request for a meeting. Although when we finally did meet, and he had given considerable thought to the question I had left him with, he had changed his mind. Now he said he was 'fascinated'.

Harris is the chef/ proprietor of Racine in Knightsbridge, London SW3, which for the past seven years has been producing more authentic French bistro cooking than can be found in many bistros in France.

I had asked to see him because I wanted to discover whether my wife's [that's me – JR] habit - and she has, happily, accompanied me to more restaurants than anyone else for this column - was as unusual as I had come to think it was.

Instead of choosing what to eat from where the main protein ingredients are listed on the left hand side of the menu, her eyes are invariably and immediately drawn to what the most exciting accompanying ingredients there may be listed at the right- hand side of each dish.

My wife is not a vegetarian. But she is definitely far more excited by the prospect of broad beans, beetroot, braised endive or by a correctly made Béarnaise sauce than she is by a fillet of fish, a hunk of red meat or a piece of chicken, however organic or expensive. How unusual is she, I wanted to know?

The night before I was to meet Harris, she, I and three other women went to put Racine's menu to the test. I chose Racine not just because I admire the execution of Harris's cooking but also because each dish comes with its own distinct, and in the chef's opinion, most appropriate accompaniment. There is a small list of side dishes but each dish is effectively complete.

There were several takers for the hot foie gras because of the Griotte cherries served with it. The caramelised endive, a vegetable once so unpopular that one chef I know used to put it on as his vegetable of the day to minimise his workload because he knew so few would order it, proved so enticing that three ordered the wild duck with cassis while another was drawn to the comfort of the haricots beans with the lamb, a combination that makes this dish a constant feature on Racine's Sunday lunch menu. I plumped for the celeriac remoulade with the Bayonne ham and then the skate as I was intrigued by the flavours that the accompanying piperade and wilted chorizo would imbue. All, ultimately, contributed to an excellent meal.

Over a pot of Earl Grey tea the following morning on a table strewn with menus past and present, Harris's first response was that this alternative view of menus was possibly 'a female thing'. Then he promptly added, 'But my wife says that women have far more common sense than men so it's probably right'

What emerged over the next hour was not just how much thought and planning goes into selecting the right accompaniments to each main ingredient, whether a first or second course, but also how much chance had played a part in a dish's final composition and how distinct ingredients are cooked.

Harris opined that he cooked the dishes he liked to eat and that the ultimate test of any dish was whether 'it ate well or not'. But his time spent writing menus for the restaurant in the Soho House club in New York had introduced him to the charms of protein- led salads, complex carbohydrate dishes and slow- release energy foods. And that he based all his new menus on talking to suppliers, looking back at old menus and, finally, on a stack of vegetable- growing calendars, although climate change was, he added, making these increasingly unreliable.

The macerated Griotte cherries appeal, Harris explained, because they bridge the gap between the richness of the foie gras and the sweetness of the pain d'épices that is served with it. 'I was initially taught that fruit and savoury do not mix but then I saw how much redcurrant jelly goes into game sauces and I changed my mind. And this recipe works well because all the ingredients can be cooked in one pan. The foie gras is cooked first, the pan is wiped down, then the pain d'épices is toasted and finally the cherries are added with a little duck stock and a tiny bit of butter.'

Another first course Harris has made his own is a warm garlic and saffron mousse now served with mussels although it originally started out accompanied by wild mushrooms, an option he still keeps for vegetarians. 'I served this once to the food writer Simon Hopkinson and he suggested that mussels would be better because their lovely, mineral, iodine flavours would contrast better with the softer texture of the mousse. And he was right.'

The combination of three slices of chorizo on top of the skate wing proved not only how putting seemingly unlikely ingredients together can make such an exciting combination but also quite how important restraint is. Harris admitted that he believes that pork is a 'fantastic seasoning' and that it could appear on the right- hand side of numerous dishes on his menu. But a mere three slices of chorizo, no more than three grams in weight, quickly sautéed in the pan the fish has been cooked in and then laid on top of the skate, permeate the skin and allow it to develop an extra range of pungent flavours.

Working with a Belgian chef had also opened Harris's eyes as to how best to cook the caramelised endives that were of such appeal to those who ordered the wild duck. 'Endive is now an incredibly popular vegetable but if you ask 12 different chefs how to cook it they will give you 12 different recipes. This Belgian chef saw my complicated way of preparing them, told me quite firmly that if there was one vegetable Belgians knew precisely how to cook it was endive and he simplified the whole process. Now I just trim the ends and roast them for up to an hour in the oven with butter and nutmeg and it works very well with anything from salmon to a veal chop.'

Before he went off for a menu tasting, Harris explained that one of the most challenging aspects of his role was to teach his chefs how to use vegetables properly. 'It's quite scary how expensive good vegetables have become but they do add so much to any dish. But I have learnt now that if you can't afford it, then don't add it.'

Racine, 239 Brompton Road, London SW3, 020 7584 4477
www.racine-restaurant.com