

Just in cosa - a puff

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In most restaurants today the food and wine have never been more skilfully prepared, represented better value, nor been served so enthusiastically.

This sweeping statement is based on hard facts. The recession has prevented restaurateurs from raising their prices. The internet has fuelled creativity amongst chefs and raised knowledge and awareness among customers to a new level. And one factor that is still growing in importance, particularly in the UK and the US, is the lure to so many young men and women of a career in what seem like the fascinating worlds of food and wine, despite the long hours and unattractive pay.

Finally, and all but forgotten now that it has been in place in the UK for almost three years and the US for longer, is the smoking ban that allows the food and wine to taste as they should. This significant improvement is only truly appreciated when visiting those countries where the ban is not yet in place.

While food and wine lovers are the most obvious beneficiaries, one small group is even more grateful - the partners of those working in restaurants who can recall the bad old days. The wife of one leading restaurateur said, 'Of course I worried about the effects of the secondary smoke on my husband. But it's equally wonderful today that he no longer comes home early in the morning reeking of the stuff.'

But restaurateurs, waiting staff and kitchens in all those countries where the smoking ban is now in place, today face a new and unexpected challenge: how to deal with the case of the disappearing diners.

This situation, which can arise several times during a meal, occurs when smokers decide it's time for a cigarette break and, stopping only to pick up their mobile phone and glass of wine, head for the front door, usually without telling anyone and often passing the waiter bringing the next course on their way out. While the waiters struggle to do their best to keep the food hot, the customer is out on the doorstep.

Restaurateurs acknowledge that there is nothing they can do in this situation but as well as 'putting a massive spanner in the running of the service' as one described it, it does significantly affect the nature of the front steps. There are butts on the floor; new customers have to walk through a fug of smoke; and the current licensing laws in the UK, which allow the customer to take a glass of wine outside (something that is not possible in the US, for example), can make the exterior look more like a pub than a restaurant.

While many accept that this is a situation that they simply have to manage, a growing number of hoteliers, as well as a few restaurateurs, across the UK are opening up specific areas to lure back the small group who used to be some of their best-spending customers: cigar smokers.

Before the smoking ban, a third of all sales of Hunters & Frankau, the UK's prime importer of Cuban cigars, were to the hospitality industry. The proportion plummeted again as the recession bit. But last year cigar sales to hotels, restaurants and bars increased by over 10% in line with the construction of a growing number of comfortable outdoor smoking areas (where 50% of the wall area has to be permanently open to the outside, allowing a circulation of fresh air to minimise any damage to the staff's health). Known in the trade as 'cosas', these use under floor and overhead heating to keep the smokers warm.

There are now over 220 such smoking areas in the UK, of which 73 are in London, including two new restaurants that have built them in to their design, Galvin's La Chapelle in the City and the second branch of Roka, the Japanese restaurant, in Canary Wharf. At Eleven Madison Park in New York, the waiting staff will prepare the cigars for their customers that they can then smoke in the park right outside the restaurant's front door.

Many of the smoking areas in hotels have been introduced by their cigar-smoking owners, such as Tim Hart at Hart's in Nottingham, Khalid Affara at his Ten Manchester Street Hotel near London's Oxford Street and at the 'cigar shacks' in the Hotels du Vin across the country. These areas with their sales of not just expensive cigars but the digestifs to accompany them, represent an opportunity to recoup the revenue the smoking ban removed at a stroke.

They also present their owners with the commercial opportunity to rival The Garden Room of The Lanesborough Hotel (pictured), which, since it opened in 2007, has probably achieved the highest turnover and profit per square metre of any hotel or restaurant in the country. Judging by the hectic scene that greeted us at 7.30 pm one weekday evening, these 44 seats may even have the highest turnover of any hotel bar anywhere in the world.

This level of business is helped by the waiter's immediately explaining that there is a minimum charge of £25 for anyone other than hotel guests. With the least expensive cigars starting at £20, this is easily reached although the hotel's wicked practice of adding 12.5% service but then incorporating this into the subtotal and leaving the service charge blank on the credit-card slip must lead to many spending more than intended.

But what was a small and rarely used garden has now become a magnet for cigar lovers from around the world thanks to the hotel's far-sighted decision to invest in an extraordinary range of cigars and to the encyclopedic knowledge of Giuseppe Ruò, its director.

Because of its position on the lower ground floor at the back of the hotel, there is always a wind blowing through the room as there is in Havana. But the sound of the buses circumnavigating Hyde Park Corner, rather than that of the sea, and the need for the heaters, confirm that this is definitely the heart of London, not Cuba.

The Garden Room at The Lanesborough, www.lanesborough.com