

A tale of two cities

26 Jun 2010 by Nick Lander/ FT

Frédéric Simonin has finally opened his own restaurant in Paris, two years after leaving London.

He started out in 1991, aged 16, as a kitchen apprentice in the fishing port of Saint- Brieuc in Brittany, where, incidentally, I enjoyed my initial exposure to French provincial cooking in 1975.

He subsequently moved to Paris to work in the prestigious kitchens of Ledoyen and Taillevent before he joined the ranks of top chef Joël Robuchon. When L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon opened in London in 2006, Simonin was running the first- floor restaurant and cooking what I and many others thought was the best French food in town at that time. Olivier Limousin, his counterpart on the restaurant's ground floor, memorably expressed to me Simonin's approach to food by banging his right hand against his chest and saying, 'Fred cooks from the heart.'

A dispute with L'Atelier's London owners led to Simonin's departure and a period in which I tried to give him as much advice as possible to ensure that he stayed in London. He was too good a cook for the city to lose, I believed, but autumn 2008, with the recession under way, was not a good time for anyone looking to open a top French restaurant. Negotiations with hoteliers in London and potential backers came to nothing and several months later, Simonin, his wife and three small children crossed the Channel.

Last year was no easier in Paris. Simonin spent the year working on a project that would have seen him take over the restaurant, bars and room service of a new hotel but ultimately the financiers pulled out. Simonin was forced to throw caution to the wind and to do what he had always dreamt of doing: open his own restaurant. Restaurant Frédéric Simonin opened its doors on 9 Apr 2010 and it is a class act.

His twenty years' experience have contributed to the choice of an excellent location. For many years his corner site had been home to a long- established restaurant in a quiet street in the well- heeled 17th arrondissement, surrounded by expensive apartments and only 500 metres from the Arc de Triomphe.

On a more inspirational level, the restaurant is also very close to two markets, one of which, Poncelet- Bayen, is particularly exciting, its stalls currently overflowing with cherries, fresh almonds, samphire, peaches, wild mushrooms, apricots, melons and strawberries. 'This market has two great advantages for me', Simonin explained. 'It inspires me first thing in the morning on my way here from the Métro, and it's very convenient if the kitchen runs out of something between lunch and dinner.'

By contrast, Simonin acknowledges that his restaurant would not have been possible without the more prosaic support of HSBC, who have backed him on the basis of his impressive CV and his business plan. Already 800,000 euros have been spent to produce a modern kitchen and a striking, if rather dark, black and white interior that seats 45.

In making the fundamental transition from chef/ restaurateur, Simonin has not overlooked the crucial importance of making the first and last impressions count. The house champagne, from grower Jacques Copinet, is excellent, while the Martini, served in a V- shaped glass resting on another glass full of ice cubes, was described to me by my cosmopolitan Hong Kong friend as the best he had ever been served in Paris. We all felt the same about the salted caramel chocolates served with coffee.

In between came a series of dishes that revealed Simonin's years chez Robuchon, evident not just in the clarity of the menu's layout and the combination of certain ingredients but even in certain implements such as the Japanese lacquer spoons for dessert. But all this has been excitingly supplemented by the Asian influences Simonin was exposed to in London.

Our only disappointment was his version of his mentor's crab and avocado dish served in a large ceramic shell that lacked the intensity of the original. But our three other first courses were stunning: the meat of a razor clam, sliced, sautéed and then presented back in its shell; half a dozen crayfish served in a creamy broth, accentuated by the precise addition of Cayenne pepper; and the witty rendition of half a dozen frog's legs enhanced by the muted addition of garlic, basil and Espelette peppers, the chilli pepper cultivated in south- west France. The phrase 'This is good' reverberated around our table on several occasions.

This clever juxtaposition continued with a fillet of John Dory with leeks and yuzu, the Japanese citrus; quail with soya; and a fillet of beef served with a consommé enhanced with lemon grass.

But best of all, and possibly the best rendition of this ingredient I have ever eaten, were the veal sweetbreads. This rich piece of meat had been simply caramelised and placed next to a significant quantity of new season's girolle mushrooms, their brown and orange colours highlighted by slices of white, fresh almonds on the top and an almond cream around the plate.

When I quizzed Simonin about the inspiration for this dish, he claimed no credit whatsoever. 'I don't believe chefs today create anything new', he opined, 'it's all been done before us. My role is just to take the best from what is in my collection of recipes and combine it correctly with the ingredients that are just in season.'

As we spoke, Simonin had one eye on his waiting staff, many of whom, including several chefs, have worked with him before in London, as they were scrupulously cleaning the dining room before the lunch service. He spotted that the laundry company had still not delivered the right sized tablecloths and was not impressed.

I asked him how he felt now that at last his name was above the front door. Back came the reply I hear from many chefs who struggle every day to capture the fleeting essence of so many different ingredients. 'I'm pleased', he said, 'but I don't think I will ever be happy.'

However Simonin may feel, London's loss is Paris's gain.

Restaurant Frédéric Simonin www.fredericsimonin.com. Unusually for a top Parisian restaurant, it is open for Saturday lunch and dinner.

Lunch menu 38 euros, à la carte approximately 90 euros for three courses.