

What's special about Lyons

10 Jul 2010 by Nick Lander/ FT

Nick gets our gastric juices flowing in preparation for next week's coverage of 2009 Beaujolais, the 'third river' of France's second city.

Lyons earns an entry of over a page and half, considerably more than Paris, in Larousse Gastronomique, the encyclopedia of French cooking.

You can almost hear the authors salivating as they describe the local soups, fish stews, meat dishes often paired with bone marrow, the famous saucisson de Lyon and all the various dishes that can be cooked à la lyonnaise, a relatively simple but very effective sauce using diced onions, butter and the pan juices deglazed with vinegar and chopped parsley.

Nature has been responsible for this abundance. Two rivers, the Saône and the Rhône, run through the city and over the millennia (it was known as Lugdunum to the Romans), Lyons has acted as a hub for the produce of the surrounding countryside: beef from Charolais; Bresse chickens; game from Dombes; and wine from the many surrounding vineyards which used to go by barge up to Paris.

In the same manner as the produce from the valleys north of San Francisco inspired that city's chefs, Lyons's natural and commercial wealth has fostered more chefs than perhaps any other city.

It was Fernand Point at La Pyramide, at Vienne, 30 kilometres to the south, who 70 years ago first propagated the combination of the best produce and the most meticulous preparation and taught many others who subsequently practised what he preached.

These include Paul Bocuse, the world's first celebrity chef, whose restaurant empire now criss-crosses the city and after whom the city's impressive food market is named. The late Alain Chapel was another disciple and it was a meal at his restaurant at Mionnay, 23 kilometres away, that initially inspired a young Heston Blumenthal to cook. The hugely inspirational Troisgros family restaurants are only an hour's drive away in Roanne. With such strong foundations, these, like Mère Brazier described below, continue to thrive.

A very special Lyons restaurant

As I walked out of the restaurant Mère Brazier on to the cobbled streets of Vieux Lyons, south east France, I felt thrilled and uplifted by the exemplary dinner I had just enjoyed with my wife [that's me - JR] and three friends. Simultaneously, I felt somewhat saddened and deflated.

I had finally eaten at the restaurant I had wanted to visit more than any other in the world for the past 25 years. And although I will unhesitatingly return here, I now know that that extra excitement, the pleasure of eating in a restaurant for the first time and discovering what makes it so very special, is sadly no longer available to me. But I can only hope that now many others will discover it.

I was first introduced to Eugénie Brazier, who took over this restaurant on 10 Apr 1921, via the books of Elizabeth David, the consummate English food writer. She made a point of eating chez Brazier whenever travelling through France to research French cooking. The two pages devoted to her in David's anthology, *An Omelette and a Glass of Wine* are the most thumbed of all in my copy.

Here David describes Brazier's modesty towards her ingredients and her customers and the understated manner of her service. The essay is accompanied by a black and white photo that shows Brazier in immaculate whites stirring a large copper pot from which steam rises to cover her head in a kind of culinary halo.

By the time she died in 1977 Brazier had also come to embody the passion so many Lyonnais feel for their food, one reason that the street outside is now named after her.

But her restaurant also exemplifies the particular historical evolution of restaurants in this city. Mère, in this instance, refers to the series of strong and obviously determined women who emerged from cooking in private houses to opening their own restaurants in the early twentieth century. Brazier was to emerge as the most renowned of all of them.

She became the first female chef to win three Michelin stars and to do so not only for this restaurant but also for her second restaurant in the surrounding countryside. And her restaurant, and several others, opened in this particular part of town, between the silk warehouses and the banks of the Rhône river because that is where the merchants used to meet, and eat, before setting sail.

The original of this black and white photo of Brazier hangs today in pride of place just inside the first of the three dining rooms on the ground floor of the restaurant that has been lovingly restored by its current chef/ proprietor, Mathieu Viannay, 43.

There are, of course, some obvious incongruities. The photo is directly opposite a computer terminal that sends the orders to the kitchen and calculates the bills, processes which would all have been done by hand in Mère Brazier's day. And while she is broad and looks like gentleness personified (although this exterior must have hidden the iron will required to run two kitchens to such high standards), Viannay is considerably thinner and seems far more intense. They share, however, the same passion for this restaurant which she created and which he has done so much to revive.

Viannay, who passed the toughest practical exams any chef can take to become a Meilleur Ouvrier de France in 2004, took over Mère Brazier two years ago. His courage was immediately repaid by the discovery of the original tiles that had been covered over and now add an extra dimension of history to the private rooms on the first floor.

But the number of these different rooms, and the distance that has to be covered from the kitchen to where the customers are sitting also reflect a bygone era when labour was inexpensive. The constant calls from the kitchen to the waiting staff that they need to scurry back to collect the food are an indication that no chef today would design the layout of a restaurant like this.

Viannay and his team seem to see these physical obstacles as just another reason to bring together the best of what this restaurant has stood for over the past 89 years and how people want to eat today.

This approach was best exemplified in what is offered in the 'Menu Classique' and the small bowl of soup that was offered as an *amuse bouche*.

The former opens with a dish of foie gras and globe artichokes, a combination rarely found outside Lyons. The slab of foie gras was about 4 cm high, and the head of the artichoke that lay next to it had been hollowed out and stuffed with a substantial mousse of foie gras. The meat main course was also ostensibly traditional, a breast of Bresse chicken stuffed under the skin with slices of truffle, and an extraordinarily luscious sauce whose secret ingredient, I was to learn, was the addition of white port.

Then there were the surprises. Viannay, I discovered, was reluctant to put quenelles, the rich fish mousse usually made from pike that is also a Lyonnais staple, on to his menu until he could create a lighter version. This he has now done using scallops instead and it is very, very good.

While Mère Brazier would have recognized these dishes, she would probably have been perplexed by the small bowl of soup that preceded them. This was a fine, clear reduction infused with lemongrass into which had been placed a small slice of shrimp, brushed with wasabi, Japanese horseradish, and topped with thin slices of radish and cucumber. 'I like making a soup like this,' Viannay explained, 'because it cleans the whole system before we move on to the more serious food.'

The adjective that constantly appears in the notes I took over dinner is correct. The dishes are correctly executed and priced. The glassware, cutlery, crockery are all correct, as is the absence of pomposity with which everything is served. It is because of their humourless pomp that top restaurants in France so often disappoint. The wine list is also 'correct' although, assembled by a young restaurant, it does not contain many very mature bottles. It does however astutely draw on the best producers from Beaujolais, the Loire and the northern Rhône nearby and prices them correctly (dinner for five with three bottles of wine came to €609).

Mère Brazier is, I am told, where the Lyonnais go to celebrate. Now, at last, I know why.

Mère Brazier, 12 rue Royale, 69001 Lyons, +33 4 78 23 17 20 merebrazier@orange.fr Closed Saturday, Sunday and August.