

What we need is more, not less, French in the kitchen

4 Feb 2005 by JR

While I was enjoying a stunning first course comprising a pile of white crab meat with the brown meat pureed with a touch of lemon juice, toast and salmon roe at Racine, London SW3 on a cold Wednesday in January, their reservation line rang with someone trying to book a table for the coming Saturday evening. "Certainly, sir," replied the French maitre d' politely "but I'm afraid that I only have tables available at 6pm or 10pm."

When I subsequently spoke to Henry Harris, Racine's unassuming chef/ proprietor, he reported that business even during a cold, dark January had been far, far better than he had expected. "Even if we could fit in another 65 covers we would still be turning people away although perhaps the swearing that my staff now have to put with when they can't give the customers the table they want would be considerably less."

This restaurant's popularity owes as much, I believe, to the talents of Harris and his team as to the culinary approach they have followed. Racine is French for root and this name was chosen specifically to convey the roots of French cooking which first excited Harris's appetite on holidays there with his parents. Hence a menu full of predominantly simple but classic French dishes which manages to comfort and excite at the same time.

Shortly after I relished this meal at Racine, the news of the highly profitable sale of the Café Rouge chain was announced. This, together with the smaller Bella Pasta brand, had been bought out from Whitbread plc by Finlay Scott and Harry Morgan, who had no significant previous restaurant experience in June 2002, and was now being sold on at a good profit to another private equity firm which obviously expects to extract further value from the business.

Scott and Morgan introduced some much-needed discipline into the business. They took all the more expensive dishes of the menu, replacing them with the likes of confit de canard; they brought down the two-course prix fixe lunch menu to under £10; and they brought in a Master of Wine to bolster the French wine list. But there were no huge improvements in the standards of the cooking. It remains competent at best, significantly below that of Racine, but of a quality level and price to appeal to and satisfy a large market. (I am reliably informed that in the evenings our local Café Rouge is the au pairs' favoured meeting place.)

Café Rouge's popularity rests on two significant intangibles. The first is its name which is clear, easy to remember and pronounce which, together with the chain's distinct red paintwork, makes them easy to spot on a crowded High Street.

The second is that this name, even more obviously than Racine, conveys the charms, smells, reliability and sheer pleasure of uncomplicated French food which I believe so many appreciate most of the time. But if this is such a potentially enormous market, why are so few restaurateurs rushing to fill it?

Certainly, in the list of 20-odd restaurants scheduled to open between the end of 2004 and March 2005 in and around central London, there are Spanish, Italian, Middle Eastern, British and of course fusion variations as well as Albannach, which promises to bring the best of Scotland to Trafalgar Square. But the heart of French cooking is sadly under-represented.

In fact the screw is tightened even further by the opening of W'Sens by the Pourcel brothers from Montpellier in southern France - probably the most lamentable opening the capital has seen for some time. As well as being pretentious - is it really necessary or customer-friendly to present the menu folded into an envelope? - it is condescending in that a significant proportion of what these two French chefs are attempting to do is to introduce 'world cuisine' to a city far more cosmopolitan than those that they have ever cooked in before. And at £90 for two courses for two with just a couple of glasses of wine, W'Sens is ?? not only ridiculously named but?? simply too expensive.

Nor does there seem to be anything more encouraging in this vein emanating from the capital's leading chefs. Hotel & Restaurant, a British restaurant trade magazine, recently quizzed ten top chefs about their plans for 2005 and, while a significant proportion were preoccupied with openings several thousands of miles from home, only the words of Bruce Poole, chef/ proprietor of the obviously Francophile Chez Bruce in Wandsworth, seemed to be spoken with a thought for the customer: "Our food has got a little simpler, although it's very hard to take ingredients off the plate rather than adding them, but we'll be concentrating on what we do best - cooking and serving good food."

These two activities, coupled with a cramped bar and an affordable wine list, have been what has kept local French bistros in business for the last two centuries. So too have their satisfied customers and although it may be something of a sweeping generalisation, it does seem to me from recent meals in Paris bistros that their traditional major weakness, the surliness of their waiting staff to new customers in particular, seems to have somewhat disappeared as that city's restaurants have struggled in recent times.

I am not afraid of sounding greedy, romantic or Francophile. I would just like more of these sorts of establishments on this side of the Channel.