

Marseille - in search of the perfect bouillabaisse

6 Aug 2005 by JR

Tracking down the most authentic bouillabaisse, that rich, garlicky fish stew which Marseille has so thoughtfully bequeathed to the world, was my original pretext for visiting the city. But no sooner had I arrived that I was enthralled by its history.

The impressive Bourse, now doubling as a Marine Museum; the brief ferry across the harbour – where the fishermen sell their catch every morning – named Caesar (although the city backed losing Pompey a couple of thousand years ago); and a mobile mint tea cart pushed round the headland of the Vieux Port by a middle aged Tunisian called Omri (who adds pine nuts to his elixir); all of these left a strong impression. Poignantly, Omri stands in the shade of the afternoon sun right by the plaque erected in gratitude to the Marseillais by the 4,553 Jewish survivors of the Exodus which, after being rebuffed in Palestine, berthed here in July 1947.

Unexpectedly, our balcony at the modest but well situated and well run Hotel Residence du Vieux Port, proved an excellent vantage point from which to witness the bouillabaisse ceremony. Around the port are scores of small restaurants which not surprisingly offer this dish at prices which range from 15 to 25 euros a head. But as I watched trays of cooked fish being taken out, expertly filleted and served in front of the customers – a pre-requisite of authenticity - it became obvious that what determines the best is not so much the quality or quantity of the fish, which are proscribed and protected by a charter drawn up in 1980, as the quality of the fish soup into which the fish are then dunked and the largesse with which the aioli and rouille are served.

Several Marseillais friends offered their own favourites and I then decided to put their two top recommendations, the Michelin starred and most expensive restaurant **Michel** (in business since 1946) up against the less expensive relative parvenu Chez Fonfon, founded in 1952. It was, in my opinion, a resounding victory for the underdog.

Michel's bouillabaisse is impressive but it was both the style and manner of its service which disappointed. The proprietor, in jeans and a blue cap, maitre d' in black suit and waiters in white jackets with epaulets exude an air of almost resigned boredom about looking after a table of newcomers, not helped by a policy of not serving either their bouillabaisse or bourride for fewer than two (Fonfon solved this logistical problem simply by cutting some of the fish into two). Add to this an over-garlicky aioli and a fiery rouille, prices that are inordinately high – 55 euros per person for the bouillabaisse or the bourride and 80 euros a kilo for simply grilled fish, whether sea bass, John dory or the local chapon – and you have a restaurant that aims to be Marseille's equivalent of L'Ami Louis in Paris but has none of the joie de vivre.

The far more charming bouillabaisse the next day Chez **Fonfon** was not just the result of more customer-friendly aioli and rouille but also of a much more appetising fish soup laced with diced, fresh parsley. And their approach of serving the filleted fish and saffron potatoes in a bowl seemed far more in keeping with what is still a simple fisherman's dish than Michel's careful placing of the fillets around a plate to mimic the numbers on a clock face.

But our meal Chez Fonfon, where the bouillabaisse is 42 euros, was enhanced by two other factors, its location and the culinary ambition obvious in the kitchen (the restaurant is a member of the 'Jeunes Restaurateurs d'Europe', an admirable association of 365 up and coming, talented chefs).

Fonfon, on a steep-sided inlet under a viaduct, looks out across the Vallon des Auffes, (where alfa grass grew for braiding fishing ropes) on to a couple of hundred small boats that seemed to bob up and down a little faster as the level in our bottle of white Bandol sank. And beyond the boats is an opera set, out of Carmen or Un Turco in Italia perhaps, where couples walk along hand in hand, the washing is hung out to dry and the kitchen porters from the nearby pizzeria Chez Jeannot hang out after a busy lunch.

Before my excellent bouillabaisse came an extraordinary first course. It was described as a mille feuille of octopus with broad beans but what arrived on a thin, rectangular dish with four separate divisions was even more impressive. The layers of the mille feuille had been created by wafers of oven roasted aubergine and fennel with the diced octopus, bound by a light mayonnaise, in between while the succulent broad beans had been given extra piquancy by an anchovy-based dressing.

While by no means all the more adventurous dishes at Fonfon were as successful it would be difficult to find fault with any of the dishes we encountered at **L'Epuisette**, no more than 300 metres from Fonfon but set into the rocks at the mouth of the inlet so that diners can keep watch on the sun setting over the Mediterranean, late night swimmers and fishing boats setting out on their night's work while listening to the lapping sea below.

Guillaume Sourrieu is the chef/ proprietor who boldly asserts his culinary philosophy by stating on his menu that 'I only serve produce which I like' and then delivers a series of dishes that ranged from those that could be easily served at home, such as an amuse bouche of three small balls of melon, two orange and one of red watermelon in the middle, to far more intricate dishes such as a grilled fillet of John Dory on a creamy rice base suffused with spicy chorizo sausage. Other dishes that fell into the latter category were a samosa filled with tangy, diced mussels; a gazpacho of courgette and mint with four tempura sardines standing upright on skewers set into a rock from the seashore; and a glistening piece of sea bass with chanterelles.

With a predominantly organic, very well chosen and keenly priced wine list, dinner at L'Epuisette prove conclusively that Marseille currently offers gastronomic excitement beyond bouillabaisse.

Chez Fonfon, 140 rue du Vallon des Auffes, Marseille 04.91.52.14.38

L'Epuisette, Vallon des Auffes 04.91.52.17.82

Hotel Residence du Vieux Port, 04.91.91.91.22

Michel, Rue des Catalans 04.91.52.30.63