

The best meals of 2005

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Despite more New Year resolutions than I care to remember, I have never been able to keep a diary. Initially, I blamed my lack of self-discipline although now it is probably more pertinent to point the finger at too much good food and wine over dinner.

Instead, over the past few years I have tried to keep a physical, professional memory bank of my own. It is not very attractive, a black, see-through plastic box about 2ft x 1ft that sits at the foot of my desk. Aesthetically, it has no redeeming features whatsoever other than its size – it is big enough to accommodate even the largest menu I bring home.

I make a point of asking the managers at most restaurants I visit for a copy of at least the inside part of their menu and, after I have taken whatever notes I may need, I consign the ones that have given the most pleasure to this black box and the rest to recycling. The plastic box is, of course, inert but somehow rifling through it generates aromas and tastes that even my notebook cannot remind me of. And, when I am stuck in the middle of a piece of writing it can be just the inspiration I am looking for.

But, above all, what these menus set in train is a series of memories much more delicious than even the meals themselves. The journeys to and from the places that have given so much pleasure – walking through Central Park to have lunch at **The Modern** in MOMA or sitting in the back of a people carrier on the way back from **The Fat Duck** at Bray to London. Walking is unquestionably the best prelude to a good meal and it will be a long time before I forget the walk along London's South Bank after a storm had just passed to an unforgettable meal at Jeremy Lee's **Blueprint Café** at a table looking out at as the sun set over the Thames and London Bridge.

Overall, I believe that I have eaten better this year than at any time in any of the last 30 years when I made the conscious decision to put quality before quantity, a happy consequence of what I continue to describe as living in the 'golden age' of the restaurant. There are four distinct factors contributing to this, each of which has positive and, in the wrong hands, negative consequences.

The first is the sheer amount of money flowing into restaurants. In the wrong hands this leads to over-design and over-intricacy, manifested in some of the most disappointing meals of the year, of which Per Se in New York, maze and the new Dorchester Grill in London are the saddest examples. But what this financial interest does mean is that those who practice their culinary skills at the very highest level can not only find themselves the backers they need but also the other income streams which underpin their experiments and their restaurants which, however expensive, barely make a financial return on their own. Hence the culinary excitement on offer wherever Heston Blumenthal, Ferran Adria, Martin Berasategui in San Sebastian, Hiroyuki Hiramatsu (in Paris or Tokyo) or Anthony Fynn in Leeds are cooking.

What also allows these chefs to extend their repertoire so continually and simultaneously contributes to the speed and precision with which any customer can be served are the huge advances being made in technology both in the kitchen and the restaurant. It is the extra-intense flavours which the Roca brothers extract from the enhancements they have made to sous vide cooking that made last summer's dinner at **El Celler de Can Roca**, outside Girona north east Spain, so exceptional. And it is advances in technology which are allowing an increasing quality threshold at the less expensive prices, as the emergence of such relaxed places as **Leon**, **Ping Pong** and **Le Pain Quotidien** testifies.

The flipside of this is that the very same advances in technology are having a devastating effect on what we eat. There has been extensive coverage of GM crops and hormone-fed meat but still too little discussion of the world's fishing industry's apparent determination to sweep the seas clean. How much longer, I wonder, will it be possible to enjoy such a simply delicious dish of turbot as that served at **Es Baluard** in the Spanish seaside town of Cadacques or the unbeatable plateau de fruits de mer on offer at **La Table de Mareyeur** in Port Grimaud in the south of France where the warm welcome comes from the very Scottish owners, Caroline and Ewan Scutcher.

It is the singling out of aspiring and inspiring individuals in the restaurant industry worldwide, a growing band I am delighted to say, which highlights why in the right hands and in the most fitting locations a meal in a good restaurant can deliver so much more pleasure than merely a cataloguing of the ingredients and the flavours of the wine.

It is this combination of extraordinary personal talent and sense of place which has distinguished meals in the most diverse of places: at Helene and Thierry Schwartz's **Le Bistro des Saveurs** in the medieval town of Obernai in Alsace; at the newly opened setting of **Steirereck** in the heart of Vienna's City Park; the definitive service, and cooking to match, at **Le Cinq** in Paris's George V; and on a less refined level but just as satisfying – perhaps even more so as these are the places I could eat at several times a week – what Graham Garrett is cooking at **The West House** in Biddenden, Kent; what Jeff and Chris Galvin are offering at **Galvin** on Baker Street; and what Richard Corrigan is overseeing when he is not encouraging his barmen to open the oysters even faster behind the Oyster Bar on the ground floor of the tastefully renovated **Bentley's** in Swallow Street, just off Piccadilly.

And what distinguishes certain meals even further is when these four criteria coincide with a sense of occasion to match. That is why if I had to choose the place which gave me more pleasure than any other in 2005 I would have to pick the city of San Sebastian in northern Spain. Our first visit there at the beginning of the year was so impressive that we returned en famille to mark a significant birthday for our son and carefully divided our time between its restaurants, tapas bars and beach. Of all we enjoyed, the memories of a most relaxed Saturday lunch at **Bodega Alejandron**, which belongs to Martin Berasategui and where the fixed price menu is an astonishingly good value 29.50 euros may linger the longest.