

Vinoteca, Wright Brothers and Canteen

25 Mar 2006 by JR

Fun is not a word that appears regularly enough in restaurant reviews although it is an integral part of what makes for a memorable meal. This we most recently discovered over a family birthday dinner at Locanda Locatelli in the West End which anyone other than the restaurant correspondent present would succinctly have described as 'great fun'.

But in analysing what appears on the plate, how it is served and whether the bill constitutes value for money it is relatively easy to ignore the fact that a key ingredient in what inspires chefs, restaurateurs and their partners to put their money into something that predominantly benefit other peoples' mouths and palates is the opportunity to have fun while working long and invariably anti- social hours. Happily, three restaurants have opened in London over the past few months which clearly exemplify this altruistic principle.

The first to do so was **Vinoteca** which has joined the growing band of good - value places to eat and drink around Smithfield Market. As its name suggests, Vinoteca's raison d'être is to allow its customers to have fun with wine and its partners, Charlie Young and Brett Woonton, have just the pedigree to execute this. Young used to work at Willi's Wine Bar in Paris (to which the simple wine influenced décor lends a healthy nod) while Woonton was at Kensington Place in London. They met while working for Liberty Wines which is a significant supplier to British restaurants.

Their professionalism and passion aside – and it is very difficult to turn down a wine that Young proposes as he moves around the crowded dining room – Vinoteca hits just the right note in its pricing, wine selection and approach. Its owners have astutely appreciated that most of their customers will know quite enough about the more classic wine styles and see their role as taking people not just into less explored areas but also one which offer very keen prices. I thought the days of being offered a good value glass of wine at under £3 in a London restaurant were long gone but here it is still possible.

From a less than expansive kitchen in the corner, chef Carol Craddock produces some equally good value food including a smoked mackerel pâté; a savoury cauliflower, courgette and tallegio tart and line caught cod with fennel, pickled anchovies and a spicy saffron mayonnaise. I can only assume from what I have seen and enjoyed here that the phrase 'portion control' is not an ingrained part of Craddock's lexicon.

While Young, Woonton and their growing band of customers are now having fun with wine, brothers- in- law Ben Wright and Robin Hancock have decided to do the same with their passion, oysters, although they too are trying to build a wine wholesale business alongside their original business of supplying oysters and other crustacea to a growing number of restaurants.

Wright Brothers' Oyster & Porter House is located in a hugely atmospheric building in the still burgeoning Borough Market by London Bridge. What was once an illegal drinking den has been transformed into a distinctive room where eating well and simply is the priority. Customers can perch at an L shaped counter and watch the oysters being opened, the plateau de fruits de mer being arranged and the chefs working in the open kitchen at the far end of the room being run under the beady eye of Campbell Star, a chef who hails from much further away than anything on the menu – Australia's Northern Territories.

The menu is as straightforward as the interior design and spreads across three blackboards: oysters from the Helford River in Cornwall, the Isle of Mersea off the Essex coast and French *specials de Claire*; whelks and winkles with mayonnaise; a thick, rich Helford crab soup; oyster rarebit and that now too rarely seen classic, steak, oyster and Guinness pie where three plump oysters are placed by the side of the dish to be dunked into the succulent meat juices at the bottom of the pie. An example of just how Wright's has already found its niche came as Star apologised for turning his back on me to stir a bubbling cauldron of fish soup, " We sold 18 litres of fish soup on Saturday and I want to get it back on the menu as soon as I can," he explained

Cass Titcombe, the chef who with his partners Patrick Malone and Dominic Lake put £750,000 and 18 months creative thought into what is now the remarkably simple but equally elegant **Canteen** in the Spitalfields re- development, is another chef working extremely hard to keep up with demand.

"What we have tried to do," Titcombe explained, " is to create a menu that matches the price points on the High Street currently offered by the noodle chain wagamama and Pizza Express but to offer a menu that is instead built around the best seasonal British ingredients. We will change our menu four times a year and plan it to be as broad as possible to attract the widest possible range of customers: breakfast, tea, biscuits and crumpets for those who live nearby; a more substantial lunch and dinner menu for those working in the City and something for those who come with their families when the market flourishes on Sundays."

Canteen's nod to wagamama is obvious in the communal tables and bench seating (although the finishes that this talented trio have employed in a room that has glass walls on three sides are definitely superior) the paper menu and the hand held consoles that send the orders from the table directly to the kitchen. And while the dishes may read sparingly on the no- nonsense menu they are served with a generosity of spirit that challenged even this experienced customer: a split pea and ham soup; a hot buttered Arbroath smokey (similar to but plumper than a kipper); potted duck with piccalilli; a salad of leeks, mustard and anchovies and two of their daily special, a mutton and vegetable pie and a whole lemon sole. And their desserts – gingerbread with quince, lemon syllabub, vanilla rice pudding and treacle tart – left the Austrian friends I had brought along and who have extensive experience in the field of all things sweet – walking out into the night waxing lyrical about the quality of British desserts.

Vinoteca, Wright Brothers and Canteen share a great deal both philosophically and operationally: a lack of pretence and pretension in their approach to customer service; an overriding emphasis on freshness and a sense of fun that would make anyone keen to return. In its design and layout Canteen goes even further in my opinion and should be visited by any HR director looking to improve their company's staff canteen.

Vinoteca, 7 St John Street, EC1, 020-7253 8786, bookings at lunch only. Closed Sunday
Wright Brothers' Oyster & Porter House, 11 Stoney Street, SE1 9AD, 020-7403 9554. Monday- Saturday lunch and dinner, Sunday lunch
www.wrightbros.eu.com

Canteen, 2 Crispin Place, London E1, 0845-6861133, www.canteen.co.uk.