

## Arbutus and The Ambassador

27 May 2006 by JR

As I was leaving Arbutus, the restaurant which has just been opened south of Soho Square in central London by chef Anthony Demetre and his restaurant manager and partner Will Smith, I congratulated its owners on what had been my second extremely good meal there in less than a week.

After Demetre had quizzed me what I had eaten - a squid and mackerel 'burger' followed by a fillet of pollack, a rarely seen, inexpensive fish served with a gratin of peas and pistachios then a diced Alphonso mango served with rice pudding - I told them about the similarly good and equally keenly priced meal we had enjoyed the week before at The Ambassador in Exmouth Market.

Demetre smiled, not surprisingly keen for the opportunity to leave his basement kitchen even for a couple of hours, and turned to Smith and said "We must go there, I've heard a lot of good things about it," to which Smith promptly replied, "When? At the moment we are open here seven days a week, lunch and dinner."

There is the possibility that they could go to The Ambassador for breakfast as it thoughtfully opens at 9am every day of the week but it is unlikely that buttermilk pancakes will turn on anyone quite as much as the heartier fare on offer at lunch and dinner. But whether Clive Greenhalgh, the man behind The Ambassador, takes the opportunity to visit Arbutus on the Sunday evening that is the only time his restaurant is closed, or falls fast asleep after six and a half days on his feet, only time will tell.

What unites Demetre, Smith and Greenhalgh other than their commitment to cooking good food and serving well chosen wines at reasonable prices with grace is that for each of them their new restaurant marks a long overdue emergence into the spotlight.

Demetre was the chef at Putney Bridge, Greenhalgh the manager at The Brackenbury and they are now facing up to the realities of restaurant ownership with a clear grasp of what today's market requires. Like their counterparts behind Moro, Racine and Galvin before them their focus is on the best, simple ingredients, in both cases often making the most of inexpensive cuts such as a salt beef in a pot au feu, ham hocks for a terrine and a breast of veal lacquered with spices, and serving their food in surroundings that exude a similar lack of pretension.

In fact the only criticism at The Ambassador on a busy Saturday evening could be raised at the noise level. But from the manner in which the two glasses of white wine we ordered, poured from full bottles brought to the table, to the polite explanation from our fresh faced waiter that there would be a 10 minute wait on the warm chocolate pudding as it was made from scratch, the service here was the equal of some imaginative cooking: a foaming nettle soup; a foie gras and chicken terrine; a squid and pork cheek casserole and a hefty macaroni and cheese gratin as well as the warm chocolate cake.

Although similar in outlook, Demetre's cooking is definitely the more polished and expansive of the two. While he allows the current season's vegetables to show off in dishes such as English asparagus with a soft boiled egg vinaigrette, a salad of Jersey Royal potatoes with watercress and goats' cheese and the Provençal 'soupe au pistou', he seems just at home with a saddle of rabbit, an Elwy Valley rump of lamb and a highly authentic, succulent rendition of 'pieds et paquets', the Marseillais dish that uses those parts of sheep that rarely make it on to many menus to-day, sadly. Both restaurants, as well as all involved, deserve to prosper.

What further distinguishes Arbutus's user-friendly approach is their wine policy: each of their well-chosen 24 white wines, three rosés, 27 reds and 5 dessert wines are available by the 250ml carafe at a third of the bottle price.

And although Smith, who worked alongside Demetre at Putney Bridge, is pleased with the enthusiastic response from his customers so far, he was happy to admit that they rather stumbled onto this novel approach. "I obviously wanted to serve a good range of wines by the glass. But last summer when I was in New York at Lupa, a really good trattoria, I ordered a glass of wine and they said they only served wine by the bottle or the carafe. That set me thinking and then, when we couldn't decide which to serve by the glass and which by the carafe; I just decided to serve them all like this and just see what happens."

This approach works particularly well because the 250ml carafe provides two good glasses for the single diner or any couple or even a pour for three; because the policy applies to the most expensive wines too, so it is possible to begin with a carafe of top quality white Burgundy and move on to a carafe of mature red Bordeaux; and best of all, if you go as we did as a table of six, it is possible to compare white wines from Galicia in Spain, Stellenbosch in South Africa and the Languedoc and then move on to the relative merits of two Pinot Noirs from New Zealand and Australia.

More such enlightened wine policy, please.

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[www.theambassadorcafe.co.uk](http://www.theambassadorcafe.co.uk)

Arbutus, 63-64 Frith Street, London W1 020-7734 4545 [www.arbutusrestaurant.co.uk](http://www.arbutusrestaurant.co.uk)

Both approximately £25 for three courses without wine.