

The virtues of loitering

15 Aug 2006 by JR

Five days assiduous and fascinating eating- out in some of Sydney's newest restaurants – for articles that will subsequently appear here, in the *Financial Times* and in *Condé Nast Traveller* – left me pondering one of those phrases that are invariably complex and ultimately unsatisfactory. The phrase is 'if only' and in this particular case it was part of the following sentence: 'if only Anders Ousback were still alive I think he would be very happy with the current state of Sydney's restaurants.'

Anders was the son of Swedish immigrants to Australia who came to play an integral role not just in the development of Sydney's restaurants but also in the dissemination of the enjoyment of good food and wine throughout Australia and beyond. A pupil initially of the redoubtable Len Evans, Australia's Mr Wine, Anders was always cited as a huge inspiration – and the source of invaluable advice – by Michael Hill-Smith when he was setting up his Universal Wine Bar in Adelaide. Barry McDonald who now runs the hugely successful Fratelli Fresh (a wholesaler and retailer with an excellent café attached) cites Anders as a huge inspiration, as do many others including Duncan Ackery who now runs all of the hospitality outlets within the Tate galleries in London.

Anders's interests were not restricted to food and wine. He was immensely knowledgeable about opera and literature and late in his short life became a much-admired potter with several successful exhibitions to his name. But like so many hugely talented people he seems never to have found happiness sadly and he committed suicide, at not the first attempt, eighteen months ago. Although we missed what I am told was an extraordinary wake, we made sure we drank a very, very good bottle to his memory on the night we heard the sad news.

Because of our friendship, which goes back over 20 years to a time when Anders was living in London, I have always associated Sydney and its restaurants with Anders although in fact he was not technically a restaurateur. He was more precisely a consultant – although I know he would have hated that word – who was brought in to advise government bodies or developers on how best to turn what were invariably dramatic spaces – in the city's gardens, on top of huge buildings or along the water – into cafes, bars and restaurants – whatever and wherever they were, spaces in which most of the people who went there would feel incredibly comfortable. The most memorable meal of my last trip to Sydney eight years ago was dinner with a long-lost cousin at The Wharf which Anders established in Sydney's Rocks district and is still going strong.

How Anders actually described himself, and fully explains the success of all that he did, came home to me as I was walking round Chefs' Warehouse, a kitchen equipment business in Surry Hills run with great taste for the past 20 years by Christopher Hazell and which has during that period supplied most of the city's chefs and kitchens. (Its new building is soon to be distinguished on the outside by a five foot whisk). By the cash desk is a black and white photo of Anders taken from his obituary in the *Sydney Morning Herald* underneath which is Anders's own, invariably modest, description of himself, "I'm not a restaurateur, I'm a loiterer."

If Anders achieved his considerable success by loitering then I only wish those more involved in the restaurant business would do the same. What I believe Anders meant by this pastime – usually associated with the words 'with intent' and of an inherently menacing nature - is that if you don't stop and loiter and watch how not just your customers will behave in the space or begin to understand how your staff are going to work within a space that may have come straight off a CAD drawing from an architect's office, then the restaurant has little chance of succeeding.

Standing in front of that small black and white photo of Anders I came to appreciate that loitering with intent to bring a good deal of pleasure to all your future customers is one of those integral but completely unquantifiable qualities that are essential to being a great restaurateur. In London the late Peter Langan had it in spades; Chris Corbin and Jeremy King obviously still do at The Wolseley; as does King's mentor Richard Polo at Joe Allen, invariably watching what is going on in his restaurant from the bar while reading the newspaper. From a proof copy of *Setting the Table*, Danny Meyer's account of his life as a New York restaurateur to be published in the US in October, it is quite obvious that he used his obvious loitering talents to great effect when he envisaged what Union Square Café could be and has become over the past 20 years; while the most conspicuous, although unquestionably the most anxious and perhaps the most successful current practitioner is Jean- Claude Vrinat at Taillevent in Paris.

I realise now that, albeit subconsciously, I loitered for a long, long time outside what was to become my restaurant, L'Escargot in Soho, during the 1980s and I can still remember the two most common locations. The first was close to the entrance to a wholesale tobacconist on the other side of the road where I mentally tried to calculate the number of passers-by (and therefore future customers) at any one time and the second was at the back of the brasserie on the ground floor where those future customers, I hoped, would turn to make their way up to the restaurant. I still have this loitering tendency and often when I am in a restaurant I will just stop and watch, wondering how this particular layout is going to work and what will facilitate that vital interaction between customers, waiting staff and the kitchen. It always takes me longer than any other member of our table to make their way to the table, and all this time while I thought I was just watching how the restaurant was operating I realise now that I am in fact, simply, loitering.

Our stay in Sydney revealed two examples of loitering, one passive, and the other active. The latter took place at the end of an excellent late breakfast in the original **Bill's** café in Surry Hills (terrific scrambled eggs and ricotta pancakes with honey in particular). My eyes had been elsewhere during the meal as my seat was directly opposite the open kitchen and I was watching the brigade at work. However, just after breakfast was finished I caught sight of an elderly, rather cantankerous looking man walk past our table and make as if to sit himself down at a table of four that had just been cleared. As he did so a waitress very sweetly came across and told him that this table was actually being prepared for four Japanese women who had arrived before him and were sitting very patiently by the door. There were, she explained, plenty of spaces for one at the large communal table - on which most impressively stood a vast mountain of brown eggs – but this was not good enough. His face turned as dark as the lightning storm that was later to close Sydney airport for an hour and he stormed out. It was his loss but a good example of just how waiting staff have to deal with more than just orders.

An example of impressive loitering by someone in a managerial position had occurred a few nights earlier over dinner at **The Kirketon Grill**. Although the food had been impressive – local oysters, a blue swimmer crab salad, grilled, sweet marrons (rather like large langoustines) and delicious bitter caramel ice cream – it had been let down by a series of service errors: our order for Tasmanian crayfish could not be fulfilled as they had sold the last lot; we were brought another table's starters and then four out of our five main courses arrived together but with a considerable gap for the fifth. But someone was obviously loitering with intent as just as the ice creams were served a manager announced that they were compliments of the chef for the mishaps together with a complimentary glass of unctuous Coteaux du Layon (see today's [wine of the week](#)).

Anders would have been impressed by such loitering as he would by the combined intelligence and customer awareness that went into what we ate and how we were served at, most notably, **Bird Cow Fish**, **Café Sopra** on the first floor of Fratelli Fresh, **Fish Face**, **Dank Street Depot** and **Icebergs**. And excellent as these meals were they would have been even better if he had been there alongside us – although such was his influence on the simple, creative, direct and honest style of food these restaurants are serving that to a certain extent he was and always will be whenever we are in Sydney.