

Lunch with 47 three- star chefs

19 Nov 2004 by JR

A gloriously sunny autumn afternoon found me standing on the steps of the Plaza Athénée Hotel in Paris's chic eighth arrondissement having just had lunch cooked for me and 47 of Europe's 49 three- star Michelin chefs by Alain Ducasse and his talented brigade.

I was talking to Heston Blumenthal of The Fat Duck outside London Julio Soler from El Bulli in Spain when Jean- Pierre Tuil, France's food and wine PR supremo, scampered across to let us know that photos of this exceptional event would be available in the next couple of days.

I was in the middle of confessing to Blumenthal that I hope never again to see a group photo of chefs eating together or raising a glass of champagne when something happened which made me bitterly regret that my mobile does not contain a camera. Pierre Troisgros walked past us wearing his loden coat and carrying our going- home bag, with a loaf of Ducasse's bread, Michelin- embroidered apron and napkin ring, in one arm and a large umbrella in the other. Raising his umbrella, he smiled and said 'Just in case it starts raining like in London'. With that he turned and walked past the first of the avenue's many fashion stores. We all smiled in turn at the sight of this man who, with his late brother Jean, had pioneered, and now with his son Michel, continues to pioneer the finest French cuisine from their initially humble base in Roanne.

But during the course of this three- hour gathering not even his reputation went unscathed as one of his confraternity repeated the old and sadly unprovable canard that he was in fact the less talented of the two. His reputation was not the only one to be discussed. Another chef proposed that whatever we may think of the meal we would be unwise to criticise anything in print as Ducasse believed that had reached such a stage that he did not take kindly to criticism, however minute.

Before however going into the realm of gossip, however trivial or interesting, let me begin with the most important issues. What did Ducasse and his team prepare for a total of about 80 diners made up of tables which included Jean- Claude Vrinat from Taillevent, Alain Senderens from Lucas Carton, Patricia Wells of the International Herald Tribune who has lived in Paris and written about French food for 25 years; Marc Meneau; Guy Savoy; Paul Bocuse; Michel Roux; Juan Maria Arzak and Santi Santimaria from Spain; Nadia Santini from Dal Pescatore in Italy and their colleagues from Belgium, Holland, Germany and Switzerland?

The aperitif, naturally, was champagne, Deutz, Amour de Deutz 1995 in jeroboam together with goujonnettes of eel. As I was walking in, Michel Troisgros was walking out – he had selflessly come for a quick glass and was then on his way to check on what was happening during the lunch service at his restaurant in the nearby Hotel Lancaster. I was expertly manoeuvred to a corner table with Savoy, Blumenthal and Arzak and two journalists from Paris- Match and a seat reserved for Michel Roux who was still on his mobile outside the room.

The welcome from Edouard Michelin who was, I was told, meeting many of these chefs for the first time, was typically French – extremely heartfelt and polite but far too long – while over in the corner Alain Ducasse appeared slightly tense as he looked at his watch, wanting and waiting for the action to begin. Within seconds of Michelin sitting down to a round of hungry applause, a swarm of sommeliers was pouring a second champagne, this time Lanson 1976 from magnum, a wine that showed considerable power and youthfulness despite being almost 30 years old.

The first course was a triumph. A circle of gelée made from langoustines' stock topped with a smaller circle of diced, raw langoustines from Guilvinec, Brittany, topped in turn with a smaller but still inordinately generous circle of Iranian oscietra caviar. What proportion of the world's stock of this sadly rapidly diminishing delicacy was consumed over the subsequent three minutes (chefs are quick eaters), I shudder to think, but as a combination this hugely expensive duo of food and wine would be hard to beat.

Next up was nicely balanced and well structured white bordeaux, 2001 Pape Clément, which stood up well to four (one too many) plump scallops on what was described as a marmalade of ceps with thin slices of raw mushroom wedged between the scallops for dramatic effect and texture. But what no wine in the world could have matched was the contents of half a dozen wooden boxes which were carried with great care from table to table to table. These each contained eight stupendous white truffles from Alba, northern Italy, which the waiter grated with a mandolin on to each dish of scallops, never forgetting to turn the mandolin over and push the very last shavings onto the waiting shellfish. What overwhelmed the wine and in fact the room was the aroma from these boxes which seemed to linger throughout the meal and might have even welcomed that night's diners.

The following course was probably unnecessary. It was a fillet of line- caught sea bass with small leeks and diced peppers and a bitter sweet sauce that took the taste buds one way while the much drier, flintier 2002 Chablis from William Fèvre in magnum, pulled them in completely the other direction. That unforgettable architectural saying, less is more, should have been applied.

Particularly, as what followed was very dramatic. Magnums of 2000 Volnay 1er Cru Les Caillerets from Domaine Bouchard Père et Fils had all the instant appeal of a classic red burgundy – a cherry ripe, pure and voluptuous nose that evolved in the glass – and was poured just before the first serving of lièvre royale (the classic hare dish from the Perigord), cooked for at least five hours on a bed of lovingly- turned autumn fruits and vegetables. This is an extremely complicated and time consuming dish to prepare even on a small scale, let alone for the 80 hard bitten professionals in the room, most of whom fell on it only too relieved that someone else's brigade rather than theirs had faced this culinary Everest.

But it did lead to professional murmurings on two counts. The first was why it was served in a bowl rather than a plate which made it awkward to cut the fillet in particular. The second was the appearance, after the bowl had been cleared, of a small rectangular plate which contained a piece of very thinly sliced baguette topped with lardo and a small bowl of the diced, very rich meat from the forefront of the hare. Professional opinion was that this would have been better served as part of the first serving although I have to say that I did not notice anything other than a sequence of empty bowls and plates.

There was also some pretty basic professional conversation round the table. Savoy and Blumenthal suddenly realised that they share the same fundamental logistical challenge day in and day out because neither of their restaurants has a back door and as a result all deliveries and refuse have to come in and out of the main front door. Not riveting, perhaps, but the very stuff that restaurants' working lives are made of. One other common denominator seemed to be the ongoing search for the most reliable supplier of salad leaves and vegetables.

The most animated dialogue was left until almost the end of the meal and took place in broken French between Arzak and Blumenthal when the former recounted how they had celebrated Blumenthal winning his third Michelin star which became public when both were taking part in Madrid Fusion in January this year. Blumenthal recalled having champagne poured over his head by all the other chefs by way of anointment to his new position and then the following morning being told off by Arzak's daughter for keeping her father up drinking until 7am – although judging by the impish smile on his face Arzak looked like a most willing participant.

With a small glass of 2003 Frontignan Cuvée Belle Etoile Domaine Peyronnet came a glass container containing a deliciously refreshing combination of mango and passion fruit sorbets with extremely light, coconut meringues. But what distinguished this dish even further was the speed with which the attentive staff poured extra sauce over the dessert, a sauce that contained wonderfully ripe pomegranate seeds. This technique, of adding something to the dish immediately it had been served – extra sauce with the hare or the uber- expensive white truffles with the scallops – was a distinguishing feature of the meal and a sign of a particularly distinguished restaurant brigade.

This meant that by just after 15.00 Tuil was on his feet to introduce Ducasse to justifiably rapturous applause. He made a brief speech before introducing his team of 21 hugely talented young chefs who then enjoyed their 15 seconds of fame while being addressed and complimented by Paul Bocuse. The lunchtime's more formal proceedings were then brought to a close – before the coffee, cigars and enough petits fours to open several patisseries were circulated, with a brief speech from Francois Delahaye, the General Manager of the Dorchester Group of hotels which owns the Plaza Athénée.

And in the strange, rather Byzantine world that is Michelin it transpired that it was Delahaye who, by underwriting the whole affair, had been our host even if the pretext for the gathering of such culinary luminaries had been the retirement of Derek Brown, the first Englishman to head the brigade of Michelin restaurant inspectors worldwide, and his replacement by the 43 year old Jean- Luc Naret.

Now for Michelin that is what I call extremely cost- effective PR.