

Nicholas Lander, in nostalgic mood, looks at two chefs whose careers began in the 1980s, Alastair Little and Marco Pierre White

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A fortnight ago I was completely duped. I arrived at Elena's L'Etoile in Charlotte Street, W1, ostensibly to have dinner with friends. But, rather than going through to the restaurant, I was hustled upstairs to be greeted by 30 former members of staff who had come to celebrate the opening 20 years ago of my restaurant, L'Escargot, in Greek Street, Soho.

Dinner was to reveal their differing paths. The general manager had gone on to establish and then sell his own restaurant group; the former chef is now a respected chef/ proprietor with an outstanding wine list; a one-time waiter runs food and cookery classes in Australia; whilst a former assistant *sommelier* is now director of Harvey Nichols' restaurants in London and Leeds and is in the process of spending on their new Edinburgh site, set to open in 2002, a cool £2.5 million. My budget for the renovation of a similar sized space in central London in 1981 was £150,000 but design was a far less important and costly ingredient in restaurants then than it is today.

The restaurant trade during the 1980s was as difficult as it is now but for very different reasons. The current multiplicity of restaurants means much fiercer competition for staff, suppliers and, increasingly, customers - as many new openings are finding to their cost, particularly at lunchtime. But in the 1980s the number of interested customers was crucially much, much smaller in an era before so many ate out so regularly and long before television, magazines and commercials had transformed the lives and earning power of so many chefs.

One other factor which has changed the restaurant scene beyond recognition is that today it is a maxim of the business that a top chef can at any one time be in more places than one. Not physically of course - although to keep up with his restaurants in Monaco, Provence, Paris, London and New York there surely must be more than one Alain Ducasse - but certainly in terms of name and cooking style. The explanation is simple enough: the opportunities and the backers are there and chefs have with very few exceptions not been able to resist the temptation to offer a sample of their culinary skills to a wider public. They are presumably only too aware of the dictum once explained to me by Nico Ladenis, one-time three star Michelin chef now overseeing a range of brasseries, that the profits generated by any restaurant are in inverse proportion to the quality of food it serves.

Whilst nostalgia was coursing so quickly through my veins I felt the urge to catch up with two chefs, Alastair Little and Marco Pierre White, who epitomised the renaissance of British cooking in the 1980s. Both have subsequently pursued separate culinary paths - the former along an Anglo/ Italian axis, the latter wholeheartedly French - with differing profiles and economic fortunes, perhaps because the two are so inextricably linked today.

What has also determined their differing fortunes is the original naming of their respective restaurants. Whilst Little has boldly, but probably unwisely from a financial point of view, put his own name above his two restaurants in Soho and Notting Hill Gate, White appears only by association via a complex web of alliances that takes in The Oak Room at Le Meridien hotel, The Mirabelle, The Criterion, The Belvedere in Holland Park, Drones and his most recent and, I believe, most disappointing opening, the Parisienne Chophouse in Knightsbridge.

As a result, Little has to cook, other than when he is leading cookery classes in Italy (www.tastingplaces.com). As I sat in his Soho restaurant I kept catching glimpses of his slim frame hunched anxiously over the stoves seemingly coaxing the last ounce of flavour out of the fish he was cooking.

Neither the room (still on the spartan side but with the addition of the odd creature comfort such as linen tablecloths and original paintings that Little would have considered completely superfluous when he opened here in 1986) nor the brief, daily changing menu, seem to have been affected by time or fashion other than one first course of tuna sashimi. Britain is represented by a creamy asparagus soup, calves liver with sage, roast cod with a deep green parsley sauce and sea trout with samphire; Italy by a fish soup with pasta, tagliatelle with summer truffles, bufala mozzarella with farro salad and a pannacotta with aged balsamic vinegar. It is a fixed price menu, £27 for three courses but without irritating cover charges, supplements or expensive side dishes, which delivers an unchanging adherence to top quality ingredients and sympathetic, unfussy delivery. Even my long-held criticisms, that the waiting staff should dress as professionally as they act and that the wine list should be usefully integrated with the menu, remain as valid as ever.

Whilst it is possible to envisage Little cooking this style of food in the late 1980s, it is inconceivable to think of a younger White bothering with and certainly not being proud of what the Parisienne Chophouse is serving. White was the chef who took London by storm and who, whatever one might have thought of his behaviour, executed some wonderful French dishes including one *amuse-gueule*, a poached oyster topped with tagliatelle and caviar, that I can still taste after all this time.

Despite its name, the Chophouse attempts to be a French brasserie but in every aspect other than the performance of one excellent French manager it failed miserably. Three soups - vichyssoise, mussel and saffron and crême Dubarry - were insipid, watery and sloppily served whilst the *prix fixe* chicken was puny and tasteless. Most unforgivably in any brasserie, the *pommes frites* were undercooked, soggy and limp. The prices look relatively inexpensive but they are merely a reflection of very poor value for money, particularly once an overpriced wine list is broached.

White has undoubtedly inculcated the basics of French cooking into many young British chefs; brought on the careers of most notably Martin Cause at The Mirabelle and Robert Reid at The Oak Room and infused a sense of glamour and the potential ensuing riches into a profession that 20 years ago was considered dowdy and dead-end. But he is now conspicuously overstretched.

One other crucial factor seems to separate these two chefs, a sense of fun. Undecided as to which dessert to choose, I asked Little as he walked back to the kitchen from talking to another table which I should have. 'Our vanilla icecream with very old sweet sherry,' came the reply together with his trademark grin, 'it's fun.' But as I sat in the Chophouse all I felt was the dead hand of a formulaic operation. That sense of fun has gone out of White's cooking.

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