

My five best courses of 2002

6 Jan 2003 by JR

Five, as far as food is concerned, is the ideal number.

At home to be able to cook for five others plus yourself is perfect, the correct ratio between the input of preparation, time at the stove and washing up on the one hand and the sheer pleasure all this generates. An extra bonus is that six is an ideal number to enjoy a single bottle of wine.

And when it comes to eating out, five is certainly the right number of courses. I will happily eat more when it is a cerebral as well as a gastronomic experience - as it is chez Ferran Adria at El Bulli, Charlie Trotter in Chicago or Heston Blumenthal at The Fat Duck, Bray, for example - but I find tasting menus which are longer than this, and insist on incorporating more than one meat course, a turn-off. The most exciting menus, like the choice of wines, have to rise to a crescendo, from foothills to mountain peaks.

I will start, therefore, on the compilation of my ideal meal this year with something as straightforward as it was special, a creamy St George's mushroom soup, served at St John restaurant in Smithfield on Saturday lunch 20 April.

I can remember the date, the company and the soup's flavour precisely because I had chosen it as the first course for my 50th birthday lunch for several very different reasons. Firstly, these mushrooms are highly seasonal, only appearing around St George's Day (23 April) from which they derive their name. Secondly, there had been none at all the year before as the restrictions post foot and mouth had prevented any being foraged. Thirdly, the glistening soup was served in large, white tureens from which everybody served themselves often to more than one helping. And, finally, it reminded me of my beloved late Russian grandfather's maxim that 'a meal is not a meal if it does not start with soup'. The fact that the soup lines the stomach and softens the alcohol intake is not to be overlooked, either.

Then to Alain Ducasse's restaurant in the Plaza Athénée hotel in Paris which is extraordinary in many aspects. The price, around 300 euros per person including wine; the ratio of staff to customers; the sheer simplicity of the menu and, above all, the undeniable conclusion that despite the hype and the cost, the experience is worth it, at least once.

Although the menu justifies its price by focusing heavily on caviar (which comes as a 'bolognaise' with spaghetti!), langoustines and foie gras, its best dish is slightly less luxurious. A hefty slice of turbot, on the bone for maximum flavour, is wrapped in chestnut leaves and smothered in thick slices of ceps then cooked in a glass bowl which the waiter brings to the table. The bowl has been sealed with a flour and water combination which is chipped away to allow the aromas of the sea and the forest to fill a dining room that is in the heart of Paris's eighth arrondissement.

For my main course I would rush back to the only Gastronomic Clinic I have ever visited. This is not, as it may sound, a rest home for spoilt restaurant writers but rather the name, *Gastronomica Clinica*, of the restaurant in the Arnaldo hotel in Rubiera, northern Italy - perhaps because of its proximity to the production areas of three of Italy's greatest foodstuffs, prosciutto di Parma, Parmesan cheese and balsamic vinegar.

The diningroom is comfortable and comforting; the waitresses dressed in black with white pinafores and the waiters in suits with the most experienced adopting the air of surgeons as they carve the restaurant's speciality, a great trolley of bollito misto. This is a classic restaurant dish as it requires half a dozen different meats - ox tail, ox tongue, zampone and cotecchino (both Italian sausages), chicken and braising beef - to be poached in chicken stock until they are tender but not falling apart. Sadly, we were moving on otherwise I would have stayed on for dinner, too.

The cheese course presents a particular challenge as, although I appreciate the care an increasing number of chefs and restaurateurs take over their cheese trolley, eating cheese in a restaurant is not for me as exciting as finding the ripest cheese in a delicatessen or cheese shop.

So I will choose one particular cheese, a Cabri Arriègois, which was on the trolley at the restaurant Castrum in Lavelanet, in the French Pyrenees, close to the Cathar ruins of Montségur and more modern, rather gentle ski runs.

Cabri is a goats' cheese, in shape, form and size, very similar to a small Vacherin and must therefore be scooped out with a spoon. But its aroma, when ripe, is even more pungent. London's La Fromagerie imports a similar cheese from the same region under the name Val du Loubière and it will be available again in the New Year after the newborn kids have been weaned.

Finally, to dessert. My increasingly strongly held belief that pastry chefs everywhere are simply trying too hard, overcomplicating what should be a light and refreshingly clean end to the meal, was corroborated by my first trip six weeks ago to the southern states of the USA, where subtle flavours are not respected.

There I left my sweet tooth in Jestine's Kitchen in Charleston, South Carolina, a small corner café whose motto is 'southern food with lots of soul'. The po'boys (short for poor boys') sandwiches had it, the pecan whiting had it and so too did the fried okra but a slice of their coconut cream pie had it in spades. The chef knows how good it is because although it is only \$4 per generous slice the menu does, knowingly, ask the diner 'not to share'. I am ashamed to say I didn't.

St John, 26 St John Street, London EC1 (tel 020 7251 0848)

Alain Ducasse, Plaza Athénée, Paris (tel 01 53 67 65 12)

Gastronomica Clinica, Albergo Arnaldo, Rubiera (tel 0522 626124)

Castrum, Lavelanet, Arivège (tel 05 61 01 35 24)

Jestine's Kitchen, Charleston, USA (tel 843 722 7224)