

La Pyramide, Vienne - a culinary landmark

6 Jul 2003 by JR

My parents arrived at Ferdinand Point's Pyramide, a world famous staging post on the great drive south, at 11pm one night in 1949, exhausted by a long day's battle with Routes Nationales. After a morning's work in London, we flew Ryanair to St Etienne and arrived in time for a stroll round Vienne before dinner.

During the meal I kept closing my eyes trying to imagine how much had changed.

The garden would have given off the same heady smells of the hot Northern Rhône; the massive plane trees would have hung across the tables on the terrace at roughly the same angle and there is still by the entrance to the terrace the large, stone font which a barber used to use to shave the original chef/ patron every morning but today is a natural fridge for magnums of champagne.

My father would have paid a bill rendered in old French francs rather than euros in cash, however, and it is highly unlikely that he would have been served by a French sommelier who, with his younger brother who cooked our fish course, had just returned to their homeland after 12 years in Sydney, Australia.

But La Pyramide at Vienne, once the very greatest French restaurant under Ferdinand Point who trained Bocuse, Chapel and les Troisgros amongst many others and now successfully restored and rejuvenated by Patrick and Pascale Henriroux, is venerable enough to take all of these changes in its stride. After all it derives its name from the statue that marked the centre of the Roman chariot arena 2000 years ago.

Les Henriroux have engineered this renaissance through a combination of hard work, skill and respect for what they took over even if at its nadir the hotel was closed for over two years before they assumed control in 1989. Two examples of this successful but contrasting approach are the first page of the wine list which pays homage to the six sommeliers who have guarded the cellar's secrets since 1882 and a menu whose novel layout I had never encountered before and which initially led to a certain amount of confusion.

Down the left- hand side of the menu are the dish's main ingredient - crab, crayfish, lobster, rabbit or foie gras as starters, with sole, zander, frog's legs and red mullet in the fish section and pigeon, beef, Bresse chicken, Limousin lamb, Salers beef or milk- fed veal in the meat - and alongside them anything from two to four lines describing what would accompany them. But whilst we interpreted these as different options they are in fact extremely detailed descriptors of each dish.

'I want to explain each dish as clearly as possible, to eliminate the possibility of anyone making a bad choice or encountering anything to which they are allergic,' Henriroux explained the following morning although perhaps an initial word from the otherwise convivial maître d' would have clarified this. But Henriroux is nothing if not committed, changing his menu, crockery and menu covers four times a year with each season and, as we were about to discover, running a highly skilled brigade.

As ever, the set menu, 'Menu Pyramide' in this instance, provided the best value introduction with three courses, plus cheese and dessert for the price of two à la carte courses and whilst my father would have appreciated this search for value he would have appreciated the first course, a futuristic, top- of- the- range re- interpretation of a prawn cocktail, even more. At the bottom of a large martini glass was a layer of a creamy mousse of lobster coral, topped by a deep, green asparagus pulp, then thin layers of lobster marinated in olive oil, wafer thin asparagus tips to add crunch and, finally, a small boule of surprisingly sweet rocket sorbet. Altogether pretty, refreshing and most appetising.

The fillet of John Dory roasted with with olive oil, sliced olives and a Parmesan cornet stuffed with salt cod incorporated all the flavours of current Mediterranean cooking whilst a ballotine of pigeon with peas, wild mushrooms and gnocchi tipped its culinary hat more to the past. A trolley of over 40 cheeses in perfect condition then followed as did two intricate desserts but what left the most lasting memory was what arrived in a small round glass container with the coffee. Inspired by childhood memories, Henriroux and his maître d' have reconstructed *gümauves* which used to be made by the *confiseurs*, sweet makers of Lyons before the war. *Gümauves* are small, pink, powdery, featherlight versions of a fine Turkish delight which we decided felt like the nearest thing we would ever come to munching on a cloud.

We drank local, a half of a white St Joseph made exclusively from Roussanne grapes by Gailard and an intense 1999 Crozes Hermitage from Alain Graillet, and because our accent was spotted spoke more English with the sommelier, Bertrand Lutaud, than we should have done. He and his younger brother, Sebastian, had gone out to Australia with their parents when their father had decided to open a pâtisserie in Sydney in 1989. He and then they had drifted into the restaurant business but all had decided to return to France when their respective, well reviewed businesses had closed.

I asked both what had been the biggest shock adapting to the Old World. Whilst Bertrand claimed that it was minimal, that in the heat of the service waiters just got on with their jobs (although he was surprised by how much wine sales had fallen in the recent hot weather unlike Australia), Sebastian had seen a far bigger change. 'It's much more strict in a French kitchen, there is no breaking of the rules and the hierarchical system is still enforced even though there is much more mixing of the ingredients. But I have never worked for a Head Chef who is so willing to help others out during the service, we often find him in the pot wash when that section gets very busy.'

When I asked Henriroux about this compliment as a *plongeur* he replied with a broad smile, 'Well, it's nice to hear I am good at something'. In the hands of such a modest, talented chef La Pyramide seems set fair for many years to come.

La Pyramide

14, boulevard Fernand- Point, 38200 Vienne (tel +33 (0)4 74 53 01 96)
Menu Pyramide 81 euros. Closed Tuesday and Wednesday _

Restaurant Of The Week

Michael Lucy has the most enjoyable walk between restaurants of any restaurateur I know.

He starts in Hyde Park by The Honest Sausage close to Speakers' Corner, (which provides the logo for his sandwiches Free Range - Free Speech), and within ten minutes is at a window table of The Dell Café with a splendid view across the Serpentine. Lucy deserves these bonuses because over the past decade he has set standards for eating out in the Royal Parks for the competition to follow and thousands to enjoy. His business began with the successful transformation of the Brew House in Kenwood, Hampstead Heath, and incorporates a café in Greenwich Park, a second Honest Sausage outpost by the Zoo in Regent's Park and a small café in the historic Audley End House at Saffron Walden, Essex.

Hard work aside (and these businesses are 363 days a year affairs), Lucy's success is due to an astute eye which combines top- quality organic produce wherever possible with key price points (the filling sausages are £2.75, sandwiches £2.50). His sausages come from a small butcher in Gloucestershire, the butties are stuffed with dry cured bacon encased in rolls supplied by the renowned Celtic Bakers.

When he is not supervising the produce, overseeing the quality or pitching for new business Lucy has his attention firmly focused on the weather forecast. 'The weather is the wave this business rides,' he explained. 'It's not just whether it rains but when. If it rains heavily on a Sunday, for example, then the whole week's business will be lousy.'

For Lucy, and any lover of an honest sausage, global warming may not be such a bad thing.

The Honest Sausage and The Dell Café, Hyde Park

Open 0900-1800 in the summer, shorter in the winter. Audley End 1200-1800.