

Calling value-conscious lunchers

26 Jan 2004 by JR

It's that time of year again, the grey, drear, still- short days of winter enlivened by the chance to find bargain meals around Britain thanks to the Lunch with the FT promotion. This was originally dreamt up by Nick in 1993 to help restaurateurs through a particularly bad time while giving value-conscious diners a particularly good deal. Since then it has become an annual event much looked forward to by those on both sides of the deal - and many of those who serve in restaurants and like to see them full. For more details go to ft.com/lunch.

Nick writes: Lunch with the FT is back, I am delighted to report, in its twelfth and I think most comprehensive incarnation.

There are 367 restaurants taking part in total at four different price categories - 43 are offering meals at £8; 172 at £ 10; 76 at £12.50 and a further 76 at £ 15. These prices, as the terms and conditions overleaf explain more thoroughly, cover a two course lunch with choices at each course inclusive of VAT but exclusive of service, drinks or a third course.

One of the particular attractions of having been involved so closely in this promotion since it began rather tentatively in 1993 is knowing how much it means to all those who take part, whether customers, restaurateurs or chefs.

Sandy Ingram who has coped particularly calmly and efficiently in the hot seat of the FT's Marketing Department with the challenge of compiling this list appreciated the pent-up interest in Lunch with the FT within hours of arriving at her desk last October. Her phone rang and it was an FT reader based in the Isle of Man who wanted to know the dates of Lunch with the FT so that he could plan his business trips to the mainland to take full advantage of it.

Talking to chefs and restaurateurs around the country elicited just what Lunch with the FT means to them. Tim Hart, proprietor of Hambleton Hall, Rutland and Hart's restaurant in Nottingham explained that "Lunch with the FT has played an important part in kickstarting a widespread revival in the lunching habit. Ten years ago we served 2,000 lunches in a year, we now serve 10,000. Our first FT campaign showed us that there were a great many prospective clients willing to drive considerable distances to enjoy fine food in glorious surroundings if the price was right."

What is particularly encouraging is that as a result of this, Lunch with the FT has become a Hart family affair - Sam and Eddie Hart, Tim's sons who opened Fino in Charlotte Street to great acclaim last year, will be offering a £ 15 lunch and early evening supper for the next three weeks.

But simply imposing these price points would not have worked had those chefs and restaurateurs who really enter into the spirit of Lunch with the FT not responded so well. Rose Grey and Ruth Rogers, whose River Cafe has proved so popular with FT readers that I have never been able to get a table during our promotion, explained just why they enjoy it so much. "We love doing the FT lunches. It brings new faces into the restaurant generating great business in January and the chefs look forward to being creative on a smaller budget."

And even my fellow food writers have been delighted. As I was rather tentatively negotiating the breakfast buffet at the NH Abascal hotel in Madrid ten days ago I was stopped by a highly respected food and wine writer who wanted to know when Lunch with the FT was starting because, as she went on to explain, what she saved on the menus of the participating restaurants she could spend on their wine lists.

But the particular reason I am so pleased with this year's list of restaurants is that it allows me as a restaurant correspondent invariably on the sidelines of the business to play a fuller and I hope more effective role, and one that is precisely in tune with what you the readers want.

The phrase most commonly used by British restaurant writers over the past two years has undoubtedly been 'value for money', the essential ingredient that chefs and restaurateurs have to consider when pricing their menus and then deliver because it is precisely what their customers are continually looking for whenever they go out to eat. But it is of course one thing to write this and to criticise those who fail to deliver, but what excites me is the part Lunch with the FT plays over the next three weeks in ensuring that 'value for money' is there for our readers to enjoy. Sandy Ingram and I have spent a great deal of time and effort on restaurants' websites to ensure that what they are proposing to offer for the FT lunch is of the same quality and at a lower price than their normal set menus.

Certainly there was a particular frisson of hunger and anticipation (I plan to be down in the West Country next week) as I read the FT menus that will be on offer at Michael Caines restaurant in Exeter, Percy's in Virginstow and Rick Stein's Seafood Restaurant in Padstow. Caines includes a chicken boudin with creamed leeks and a loin of pork with caramelised apples and a spiced jus; Percy's offers polenta with goats cheese in a coriander and tomato sauce and braised home-reared lamb with parsnip and rosemary mash; while Cornwall's brave fishermen allow Stein and his brigade to prepare skate au poivre (get it?) with a sauce bearnaise and a fillet of haddock with spring onion mash and morels.

What is also exciting about reading these menus is the prominence that they give to our long association with Save the Children. Together we have now raised over £500,000 for this wonderful organisation which does so much good work all over the world (www.savethechildren.org.uk). It is difficult to give a precise figure because many of you have generously contributed via CAF donations, but yet again I would ask you to support Save the Children by giving some part of the money you have saved to SCF. If you are not presented with a special envelope, please ask for one!

And while you are donating to the charity may I also ask you to help my understanding of how the participating restaurants are performing by filling in the FT questionnaire which should be either on the table or handed to you with your bill.

There are four questions about how the restaurant and its staff have performed, questions which cover how you were welcomed, how the meal was served, how good your meal was and, finally, that crucial factor, value for money. Please do take the time to complete this and send it off to the Freepost address. Three names will be drawn from the all those responding and these fortunate readers will be rewarded with a meal to the value of £200 at a participating restaurant of their choice.

I do hope that the contents of Lunch with the FT 2004 will give you even more pleasure than we have had in assembling it.

For full details go to ft.com/lunch.