

Valentine diners, London openings and wine bargains

4* The unusual combination of Valentine's Day falling on a Saturday may lead outsiders to speculate that this will mean bumper takings for the world's restaurateurs - but they would be mistaken.

Restaurants will undoubtedly be very busy but it is likely that at the end of an extremely hectic and occasionally dramatic evening takings may well be lower than on a normal night.

Saturday nights are very different from the rest of the week - they tend to start later and bring in larger tables whose drink bills compensate for the loss of the early evening business.

Valentine's Night is the very opposite. Anyone looking to go out that night will want a table for two, leaving restaurant managers with the headache of just what to do with their larger tables (several I know have temporary small tables built just for the night) and couples also tend to drink less (no casual requests for "one more bottle"). That is why so many restaurants now offer a fixed price menu with an introductory glass of sparkling wine.

And then there are the tears. The poet William Blake was undoubtedly correct when he wrote that what both men and women require from each other is 'the lineaments of gratified desire' but Valentine's Night, with its unspecified agenda, does mean that there are often those who leave the restaurant unhappier than when they arrived, no matter how good the food and service were.

* The Cut, which runs south of the Thames from Waterloo Station to Blackfriars Bridge, may not be the most prepossessing of London's streets but it has certainly produced some culinary gems.

It has been home, seemingly for ever, to the jolly **Meson don Felipe** at number 53 (020-7928 3237) which must have served more chilled fino sherry than any other London restaurant. Then it witnessed the birth of the original outpost of **Konditoor & Cook** (020-7620-2700), great cake and pastry makers inter alia, at number 66 which shares the foyer of the Young Vic theatre.

A decade ago on the other side of the street Theodore Kyriakos brought an exciting new dimension to fish cookery when he opened the original **Livebait** at number 43 (020-7928 7211). Although Kyriakos is now to be found at one or other of his Real Greek outposts in Hoxton or Clerkenwell, this restaurant is once again on the up. And number 33 saw the initial **Tas** (020 7928 2111), now a small chain serving mezze and pide, Turkey's answer to Italy's pizza.

Now the triumvirate of Harry Lester, Jonathan Jones and Robert Shaw have got together to turn **Anchor & Hope**, a well-lit corner site at number 36, into a smashing gastro-pub.

Given their pedigree this is not surprising. Lester used to work for Michael Belben who opened The Eagle on Farringdon Road, London's original gastro-pub, while Jones and Shaw met at the seminal St John.

Anchor and Hope follows successful gastro-pub principles: no bookings; an interior which is light on all creature comforts but a kitchen heavy on hearty, flavoursome and great-value food. On offer recently were deep fried sprats; Arbroath smokies; crab on toast; potato soup and foie gras; baked mutton chops and barley; and, most enterprisingly, several dishes for two or more - a rib of beef; slow-cooked stuffed duck; and a baked shoulder of mutton. I would return just for their quince tart.

Closed Sunday and Monday lunch, tel 020-7928 9898. Lunch 1200-1430, dinner 188-2230, bar snacks all day

* The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea has also witnessed some remarkable restaurants but none in my opinion quite as incongruous as the Peridot and 1880 which have opened under talented chef Andrew Turner in the recently opened **Bentley** hotel.

This is a place for anyone who dislikes minimalist hotels. Originally funded from Turkey, the interior is plush, with hefty chandeliers, acres of marble and chairs and curtains that seem to have used up kilometres of multi-coloured brocade.

Turner has brought a strong, classic touch to his menus which rise above the windowless and rather soulless dining rooms. While 1880 is only open for his 'grazing menus' in the evening, **Peridot** offers a number of Turner's signature dishes at lunchtime at, as in so many hotel restaurants, very keen prices.

From a menu which offered two courses for £19, we were particularly impressed by a rabbit veloute with crisp won-tons, a salad of crunchy pig's ear and black pudding, French pigeon with creamed Savoy cabbage, and a roast breast of Challans duck with pommes Anna. Service was particularly friendly and knowledgeable. This is not a particularly romantic setting but would be perfect for a discreet business meeting.

The Bentley, 27-33 Harrington Gardens, London SW7 4JX, 020-7244 4625, www.thebentley-hotel.com

* Restaurateurs worldwide have become much more savvy at marketing the wines they sell and not just by extending the range of wines by the glass. Walk-in wine stores visible from the dining room; walls of wine bottles; and wine dinners with wine makers or wine writers are now seemingly staples of new restaurants and their plans to liven up quiet nights of the week.

But Chris Ellis, the oenophile proprietor of **The Windmill** restaurant near Marlborough, Wiltshire has gone one step further. He has chosen four quiet nights between February 17th and April 7th and marked them 'wine bin end give away nights' slashing the prices only on these nights on wines from Leoville Las Cases 1970 (25!) to red burgundies with bottle age at under twenty pounds and several others less than a tenner. Tel 01264-731372, email thewindmill@whsmithnet.co.uk for full details.

I do hope more will follow this example.