

## Albert Roux - how Le Gavroche was born

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Last week Silvano Giraldin, the highly respected maitre d' of Mayfair's Le Gavroche, made an unprecedented and unusual faux pas when he over-booked the restaurant not by the odd table but by a factor of four.

Instead of the usual 60 customers enjoying what is probably the best-value lunch menu in town there were 250 friends, suppliers and chefs holding on to their glasses of Mumm champagne and nibbling away at miniature versions of copious Le Gavroche dishes: oysters in champagne; grouse pie; artichokes with foie gras and truffles; and turbot stuffed with wild mushrooms.

At 13.10 a hush fell over the noisy crowd when Xavier Darcos, the French Minister responsible for promulgating French language and culture, spoke in fulsome praise of the restaurant's founder, Albert Roux as a chef and teacher. To shouts of bravo, Darcos then pinned the Chevalier du Legion d'Honneur on to Roux's lapel to join the honorary OBE he and his brother, Michel, had received from Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, a couple of years ago .

Whether either government would have made such awards had they known of Roux's criminal past is now only a matter of conjecture but he was more than happy to confess to them when we met a couple of days before the ceremony at Brasserie Roux on Pall Mall.

"I came to London when I was 18 to work for Lady Nancy Astor and I fell in love with this country. It was love at first sight," Roux explained, "but then I had to go back to France to do my National Service. As soon as it was over I came straight back but I was stopped by the Customs Officer at Dover because my work permit had expired. A red cross was stamped on my passport and I was declared persona non grata. I was left for seven hours in the custody of a policeman who showed me how easy it was to smuggle cigarettes under his helmet," Roux added with a smile.

Happily, Roux then went to work at the British Embassy in Paris where the necessary connections were made not just to facilitate his return to London but also, in due course, to induce six well-connected individuals to invest £500 each to enable Albert and Michel to open Le Gavroche, originally in Lower Sloane Street, in 1967. And, equally importantly, in an era when restaurants were not the subject of media attention they are to-day, to invite 500 potential customers to their opening party.

This move led in turn to the smuggling side of his career. "My timing was impeccable because there were so many bad restaurants then it was obvious that London needed a good one. But, of course, in those days there was no-one bringing in the foie gras, the poulets de Bresse or the Challons ducks we wanted to serve so we had to do it ourselves, going over in an old Peugeot and bringing back ingredients that even if we had declared to the Customs officials in those days, they certainly would not have understood or condoned them. But I do remember cooking foie gras and duck for the then Minister for Agriculture, Food and Fisheries and wondering whether he knew how his food had managed to arrive at our kitchen door."

But putting his culinary skills and criminal past to one side, Roux has also managed over the past 50 years to overcome challenges which not only face restaurateurs worldwide but also anyone running a family business, most notably opening Le Gavroche with his brother, Michel, and subsequently handing it over to his son, Michel Jr. How easy had these transitions been, I wondered?

"That there were two of us at the beginning was a huge blessing," Albert confessed, " but Michel was always going to follow me whatever I did, whether I had been a priest or a fireman and we worked together pretty well for a number of years. But then he wanted to fly his own kite, not surprisingly, as I am a very dominant person. But I had just bought the Waterside Inn at Bray, then a neglected pub where a wall prevented any view of the Thames, for £20,000 and he said that he wanted to take that on. And look what he has done with it," Roux added with a smile referring to the three Michelin stars his brother has held for the past 20 years.

If Albert was not surprised that one day he would part company with his brother, he was very surprised that his son wanted to join him. "When our children were small they certainly didn't see much of me. I would never be home before midnight and I used to go to the markets every other week each morning at 5am so I can still hear their mother's cry of

'Let Daddy get some sleep' when they wanted to see me. And he was doing very well at school. But one August, when he was 14, we were fishing on a boat off the Ring of Kerry in Ireland and I asked him what he wanted to be and he replied, "Why are you asking? I want to be a chef of course." I was so happy I almost fell off the boat.

Apprenticeships were arranged with a patissier in Paris and in the late Alain Chapel's kitchens in Mionnay before Michel Jr, to retain his French passport, undertook his National Service cooking for Presidents Giscard d'Estaing and Mitterrand in the Elysée Palace. Father and son then cooked together for six months at Le Gavroche until 07 oct 90. "I was 55 and I turned to Michel and said 'That's it, don't expect me in tomorrow.' And he has been in charge of the kitchens ever since."

Albert's biggest concern when he walked out was not for the restaurant's culinary standards but how his son would get on with Giralдин who, having joined Le Gavroche as the most junior waiter in 1971, was now running the restaurant. "There is no point in having good food without good service and from the moment the bell sounds in the kitchen to announce the arrival of the first customer he's the boss in the restaurant," Roux added, "but fortunately they have got on very well." One or two guests at the ceremonial lunch thought that in fact Giralдин works even better alongside the son than the father.

One reason for the restaurant's continued popularity was Roux's decision 18 years ago to offer a keenly priced set lunch menu which includes wine but makes no mention of it on the bill, particularly useful for those submitting business expenses. "I did this for one simple reason, to put bums on seats," Roux explained. "Too many chefs just don't appreciate until it's too late that their single biggest cost is their staff so you have to keep busy. We don't make that much money on it but we don't lose any and we are always full. When we opened it was a sellers' market but those days are long gone and to-day chefs must be professionally aggressive with their pricing."

As he finished his cigar and glass of champagne Roux, who will be 70 next month, expressed what he believes has been the biggest change in how we in Britain, quite obviously his adopted country, have come to enjoy our food and wine. "The great difference today is that what you eat or where you go to eat no longer attaches any kind of label. Good food is the same for everyone fortunate enough to be able to enjoy it and pay for it. Le Gavroche used to be the preserve of the Conservatives but now just as many Socialists eat there. Long may that continue!"

*Le Gavroche, 43 Upper Brook Street, London W1, 020 7408 0881*

*Closed Saturday lunch and Sunday.*