Nicholas Lander eats bison and drinks deeply at the well or cultural change in france

23 Nov 2004 by JR

The sight of dozens of French families sitting round restaurant tables is not in itself surprising. But in this instance, and at another 239 locations around the country, there were significant differences from the decades-old image of la belle France.

Above each table was an umbrella shouting Coca-Cola. There was hardly a bottle of wine in sight. Nor was there any menu as everyone ordered from a paper table mat that doubled as the menu. The waitresses, sporting short denim skirts and white T-shirts embossed with the profile of Red Indian chiefs, scribbled down not the descriptor as it appeared on the menu but its equivalent number on the computer ordering procedure.

Finally, there was the mixed language of the menu itself. Along with classic French sauces such as bearnaise and Roquefort were salads Kentucky and Florida; a Cajun tuna steak; a rodeo steak from Charolais beef as well as ostrich and bison, brownies and crumble. Most tellingly for any parent was the small print in the bottom left-hand corner which explained that except on Saturdays any child under 12 eats free.

This is not McDonalds - which in France has 760 branches and employs 30,000 and has been the object of so much anti-American and anti-globalistation campaigning led most notably by José Bové - but an outpost of Buffalo Grill. This French company opened in Avrainville south of Paris in 1980 and is now sweeping into Spain, Switzerland, Belgium and Luxembourg. They may deliver convenience, reliability, fair value, pretty good steaks to French adults, and hamburgers, chicken nuggets, slides, swings and bouncy castles to their children, but their popularity is just one of many signs of cultural change in French food appreciation.

There is no question that French confidence has been badly shaken by recent European food scandals and that the belief that produce is safe and good simply because it is French no longer holds true. The most visible and ubiquitous signs of this transformation are in the markets, supermarkets and shops across the country.

Five years ago there were no more than a couple of organic stalls in any French town on market day. That number has increased five-fold and on Saturday mornings they unquestionably boast the longest queues.

Whilst the range of organic produce in the supermarkets has also significantly increased, what has changed most recently in these outlets and in individual artisanal shops is the amount of product information that is provided - the past couple of years must surely have been boom times for the label-printing industry.

A local baker, with a long tradition of slow-baked, traditional loaves and a queue of 15 to 20 cars outside his door on the stroke of midday has put up two new, eye-catching signs above his cash till. The first is headed Traceability and lists the background to his many products. The second gives the name and address of the flour mill in Paris, 500 kilometres away, which is effectively the backbone of his business.

Buffalo Grill employs similar tactics. A large sign by the vitally important car park (most of their sites are in busy out-of-town locations) reads *Soyez futé avec l'autruche et le bison* - 'Be in the know with ostrich and bison', two meats so far untainted by any food scandals. And the menu lists the provenance of the meat, albeit none too specifically: the bison is from 'North America'; the steaks from 'South America' and the ostrich has been grain-fed.

The meal itself was uneven but definitely fun. An individual bowl of salad arrives immediately and salty popcorn with any of the touted cocktails. The barbecue sauce with the first course of 'Texan' chicken wings would have had any full-blooded Southerner laughing or crying it was so bland, but all the steaks, generous by European standards, were flavourful and cooked precisely as we had ordered them. We avoided ostrich, a dry meat which needs a subtle sauce, but the bison, more acid and less tender than beef, was fine. The two children were delighted and our bill with half a bottle of decent Chinon came to £70 for six.

What was beyond doubt was the slickness of the operation. The receptionist dispenses drinks, wines and desserts and processes the credit card payments whilst a small kitchen of two heavily perspiring men cooked for well over 150. There

was also no doubting the sincerity of our waitress who displayed far more friendliness and charm than the entire waiting staff during a recent meal at the three-Michelin-star Le Jardin des Sens in Montpellier where the bill had, not surprisingly, been several times higher.

Buffalo Grill has struck a popular chord amongst the French as well as the British, German and American tourists who were in the restaurant: it offers a speedy service at lunch and fun in the evening; there is something on the menu for everyone and of every age and all this is backed up by slick marketing and free gifts. And if in the long term it brings families back together round the table, it will reverse a social malaise that affects even France.

But what is most surprising about the Buffalo Grill, yet most quintessentially French, is its heavy and outdated reliance on protein. Ninety per cent of the menu is meat and only one vegetable is available: (mis-spelt) haricots verts, for which there is an extra charge. Strip the menu of its American starters and desserts and the menu is no more than a modernised, bowdlerised version of the traditional brasserie menu with a hefty emphasis on steak, duck, chicken, andouillettes and lamb.

There is no attempt whatsoever to include the healthier, fresher ingredients and dishes of the southern Mediterranean or the Levant that for a variety of reasons of sustainability, environment and individual well being, ought to become an increasing part of our diet.

But, as only the French would say, *plus ça change, plus c'est la meme chose*.