Nicholas Lander at Market, Paris's most talked about restaurant

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Last week I watched two French restaurateurs, one from Paris, the other from the Lubéron, meet by chance outside Jean-Georges Vongerichten's recently opened Market restaurant just off the Champs Elysées. They immediately began to swap views on the food they had just enjoyed.

It was a brief conversation, not just because they could find so little to criticise but also because, as one explained, Vongerichten has once again created the kind of menu that today's customers crave. 'Cosmopolitan Parisians are increasingly looking for light, innovative flavours in their food and when they go out in the evening to pay no more than 400-500 francs per person for the pleasure,' he explained.

Market delivers just that. And, not surprisingly given its location, the identity of Vongerichten's other partners, Christie's chairman François Pinault (Market has been carved out of a part of Christie's offices) and film director Luc Bresson, as well as the current craving for the new, the restaurant has been extremely busy since it opened. Paris's *jeunesse dorée* seem to have found just what they wanted all along.

Useful connections apart, most of the credit for Market's initial success must lie with Vongerichten. He has created a masterful menu, not just in terms of originality but also of balance between its various sections so that it can all be delivered swiftly from a basement kitchen, and for the thorough training he has demonstrably inculcated into a young brigade led by Thierry Papin and Eric Johnson.

This is Vongerichten's eleventh restaurant but, perhaps surprisingly, the first in his native France. He has until now been better known to Americans for Jo-Jo, Mercer Kitchen and Jean-Georges in New York, Prime in Las Vegas and to lovers of French/Thai food for branches of Vong in London, Hong Kong and Chicago.

The first inkling of just how frequently Market changes its offer in keeping with its name came when we, its first customers at 8pm, asked for the wine list rather than ordering an apéritif. Our waitress, who was subsequently to reveal a deep knowledge of the menu, apologised and said that that evening's list was just being printed and would be ready in a couple of minutes. When it arrived at our dimly lit table it revealed some well chosen, fairly priced bottles, most notably a tangy white La Lune Anjou from Mark Angeli (280 francs) and a meaty Domaine des Chênes Roussillon red (200 francs), both 1998s.

The daily changing menu is split into five main categories: Vongerichten's famous black plate created initially for Vong; pizzas, but not with the kind of topping any self-respecting teenager would recognise; a 'raw bar' which delivers oysters, marinated fish and seafood; and then the more common first and main courses (there is a small vegetable section which offers at 32 francs a side dish of what must be the world's most expensive chick peas).

But most importantly for any discerning consumer in this part of Paris there is no minimum charge and no rigid formula as to how to order - although at lunch there is a three-course 180 franc se-price menu.

Our table of six promptly set about making life as difficult as possible for the kitchen. A shared black plate delivered expertly fried prawn brochettes, crisp crab parcels, rolls of raw tuna and lobster with daikon (a Japanese radish) with four different dipping sauces, their fresh flavours only marred by rather ordinary chicken satay which we had been told to eat as the final item. This was followed by our only venture into Market's main courses, an exceptionally generous fillet of sea bream, its skin deeply encrusted with herbs on a sweet and sour broth, a dish that was an excellent combination of Asian influences with French produce and culinary skills.

Most went the two-starter route but not with any discernable structure. A pizza topped with goat's cheese, tomatoes and rocket was followed by a mouthwateringly fresh plate of tuna tartare, chive oil and wafer potatoes, the kitchen's upmarket version of fish and chips. Thin slices of sea bass marinated in lemon olive oil with superior garlic bread preceded an exemplary rendition of that Thai favourite, chicken soup with coconut milk and galangal. But most looked on in envy at the pizza, no bigger than a frisbee, generously topped with slices of fontina cheese and black truffle whose aroma enveloped the table.

Market's kitchen delivered all this expertly and expeditiously and did the same with the desserts including an individual, hot chocolate cake with caramel icecream that arrived with none of the fuss or the *longeur* that so many less well organised kitchens demand.

But where Market has been let down is in its design. Hard, unbroken wooden features bounce the volume round the room, a situation exacerbated by large plate glass windows which do not open on to an inner courtyard. This is one market that depends entirely on air conditioning.

More annoyingly still, too many tables have been greedily squeezed into the area around the front door which also acts as the bar and reception. Finding your coat means an unnecessary jostle with harrassed waiters and hungry customers. Do book at Market but stipulate a table as far away from the door as possible.

Market, 15 Avenue Matignon, 75008 Paris (tel +33 (0)1 56 43 40 90)
Closed Sunday.