

The merits of restaurateurs

25 Nov 2004 by JR

The first of what I hope will be many columns for *Business Life* - which I intend to make as fun and didactic as possible - gives me the opportunity to make a confession.

Because, or in spite, of having spent the past 20 years in and around the restaurant trade, as restaurateur, columnist and consultant to several arts organisations keen to improve their food, wine and service, I do not have a favourite restaurant.

This is not because I am difficult to please or spoilt rotten (although I admit I have been most fortunate in my choice of profession) but simply because restaurants as well as satisfying a need for solid and liquid refreshment also directly reflect the time and place in which they take place.

Meals, like wine, invariably taste better at the weekend rather than during the more hectic week and are always more relaxed, memorable and cheaper when you are on holiday than at the end of the working day wondering whether you will be home in time for the babysitter. A significant part of how you enjoy your restaurant meals depends on your own state of mind - something no restaurant writer can ever affect.

But this is just where a good restaurateur comes into his or her own and the vital difference such an able practitioner can make is something I always appreciate. To be blunt, give me an establishment run by a restaurateur rather than a chef any day.

So of France's twenty three-star Michelin restaurants my favourite by far is Taillevent in Paris (tel +33 1 449 51501), the only one still in the hands of a restaurateur, the ultra-suave Jean-Claude Vrinat and his family, rather than a chef. Over in New York I am afraid that, like many thousands of others, I am a member of the Danny Meyer fan club, the restaurateur behind Union Square Café (tel +1 212 243 4020), Gramercy Tavern (tel +1 212 477 0777), Eleven Madison Square (tel +1 212 889 0905) and Tabla (tel +1 212 889 0667).

Whilst these two restaurateurs have transformed eating out in Paris and New York respectively, another great restaurateur, Drew Nieporent began his career as restaurateur in New York with Montrachet (tel +1 212 219 2777) before travelling the world with his business partner, chef Nobu Matsuhisa, opening Nobu restaurants in New York (tel +1 212 219 0500), Los Angeles (tel +1 310 854 1115), London (tel +44 20 7447 4747), Milan (tel +39 02 723 18645) and, most audaciously, Tokyo (tel +81 3 5467 0022).

In London I was a rival before becoming an admirer of all that Jeremy King and Chris Corbin have achieved at Le Caprice (tel 020 7629 2239), The Ivy (tel 0207 836 4751) and Sheekey's (tel 0207 240 2565), and it will be interesting to monitor their development without these individuals' day-to-day involvement. I am equally impressed by one-off successes such as Pied à Terre (tel 020 7636 1178) run by David Moore and the mini-empires being built up by Nigel Platts-Martin at The Square (tel 020 7495 7100), Chez Bruce (tel 020 8672 0114) and The Glasshouse and Joe Levin at The Capital (tel 020 7589 5171), The Greenhouse (tel 020 7499 3331) and The People's Palace (tel 020 7928 9999).

Restaurateurs not only play an important role in how you will enjoy your meal but also, and perhaps more crucially, where you can enjoy the most interesting food by regularly opening up areas of the city that were formerly considered off limits.

Sir Terence Conran brought the whole of the area south of Tower Bridge to life when he opened what is now rather grandly referred to as the Gastrodome which incorporates Le Pont de la Tour (tel 020 7403 8403), Butler's Wharf Chop House (tel 020 7403 3403) and my particular favourite, the Blue Print Café (tel 020 7378 7031) with its views of the river and Jeremy Lee in the kitchen.

When Trevor Gulliver opened St John (tel 020 7251 0848) with chef Fergus Henderson he did the same for Smithfield Market which, with Club Gascon (tel 020 7796 0600) and Smith's of Smithfield (tel 020 7626 6666) is now London's most up-and-coming restaurant quarter. Others who have done the same, and to similar high culinary standards, include Mark Sainsbury, Sam and Samantha Clarke who opened Moro (tel 020 7833 8336) and promptly enlivened the area close to Sadlers Wells and Paloma Campbell and chef Theodore Kyriakou when they opened The Real Greek (tel 020 7739 8212) in Hoxton, just north of the City.

In their kitchens chefs weave magic. But for me a restaurateur's magic extends even further.