

## Changes in the restaurant industry over the past 20 years

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Because I try to preserve my anonymity by not having my photo published with my articles, a policy which does make restaurant reviewing more independent, you will have to take my word for the fact that this issue of *Business Life* coincides with two personal milestones: my fiftieth birthday and 21 years in and around the restaurant trade.

Whilst the former event obviously leads to profound, possibly troubling reflections about the future, the latter, at least on the surface, leads to far more optimistic even joyous thoughts because the last 20 years have certainly been a golden era for the European restaurant industry. But what has fundamentally changed restaurants during these two decades is also linked to what may make enjoying them in the future far less pleasurable and must serve as a warning to anyone who enjoys eating out.

The big change is that of course restaurants have entered the democratic era. Once the preserve of the rich and wealthy they now belong, quite rightly, to all of us. The best are still not cheap but throughout Europe the desire to eat well, to see and be seen, to take part in the theatre that is a well designed restaurant space enthralled even teenagers. And today most British restaurateurs will even offer facilities for babies, the next generation of customers, an unheard of consideration 20 years ago!

Here are two examples of this transformation. The first is that I have always made a point of starting a conversation with London's cab drivers, the most astute social and economic commentators I ever come across. But today I try and conceal my own profession as I know that instead of learning from them I will be pumped for information about which, where and why are the city's best restaurants.

The second concerns Michel Roux, chef/proprietor of the three-star Michelin restaurant, The Waterside Inn at Bray. Roux came to England as the personal chef to Cécile de Rothschild in 1963, at a time when fine food was the preserve of the few. But as well as having one foot still firmly in the world of fine French food, Roux is part of BA's Culinary Council, writes the menus for a flotilla of American cruise boats and has a small hotel and restaurant in deepest Suffolk, a county whose gastronomic gift to the world was until recently Adnams Ales from Southwold.

This democratic change has spawned many obvious transformations. The huge surge in investment that manifests itself in dramatic interiors; the technology which allows your order to be transmitted across floors without a poor commis waiter running up and down with pieces of paper; the emergence of great value wines from so many different countries as wine lists have become vehicles for the restaurateur's passion rather than dusty, biblical tomes; and the fact that your food in a London restaurant may be cooked by an antipodean chef just as readily as a meal in Sydney could be being prepared by a British chef travelling the world in search of new flavours and techniques. None of this would be possible if restaurants were still a minority pastime.

But these improvements have brought with them one significant concern - our food chain has never been so endangered. And as the distance grows between producers and consumers and the environment becomes more polluted this decline shows no sign of abating.

BSE and foot-and-mouth are the most obvious examples but in the piscine world matters are not much better. Fish stocks are declining everywhere, forcing European fishing fleets to raid stocks off Africa and south America and culminating in the recent decision of the 13 strong Loch Fyne restaurant chain to take skate, monkfish and swordfish off its menus as part of its efforts to help to preserve stocks. Chicken, which we all erroneously consider safe, is no better. A recent survey by the Food Standards Authority into imported chicken, which accounts for over 20 per cent of all the chicken we consume, found that almost half had a meat content 5-26 per cent less than that declared on the label and added water content ranged up to 43 per cent!

Naturally, this is a worrying trend, but two developments make me optimistic.

The first is that the phrase *caveat emptor* or 'buyer beware' must be part of everyone's approach to food selection and buying, and the huge amount of information about food that pours out from the media is definitely leading to a better educated restaurant customer.

The second, and perhaps the beginning of a process that may be as significant as the democratisation of restaurants over the past 20 years, is that chefs and restaurateurs are becoming far more specific about where their produce comes from. This involves not just buying from the best but also crediting them on the menu. Prime exponents of this trend include Michael Caines at Gidleigh Park, Devon, with his beef and lamb suppliers; Martin Lam in Battersea's Ransome's Dock with his Trelough ducks from Barry Clark in Herefordshire; John Torode at Smiths of Smithfield and Paul Heathcote in his Lancashire outposts. Even on more basic ingredients such as vegetables and salads, chefs and restaurateurs are beginning to work far more closely with farmers to ensure continuity and quality. One London restaurateur, Vernon Mascarenhas, has just sold out to establish a new career as a middleman between a grower with 200 acres under polytunnels in Surrey and a group of highly respected London chefs who will be guaranteed that they will be able to serve his produce within 12 hours of it being picked.

The restaurateur's profession is evolving. They originated in the early 19th century to restore travellers to good health after their arduous travels but today, in possibly an even more dangerous environment, the most considerate will also be aiming to deliver the reassurance that we all need as our own connections with what we eat become ever more distant.