

## Is this the death of the restaurant as we know it?

23 Nov 2004 by JR

It is a painful, unforgettable experience.

You walk into the restaurant hungry and anxious. Will it still be open? You are greeted inhospitably and informed, somewhat curtly, that the kitchen closed five minutes ago. Feeling even more disconsolate and hungry, you are forced to walk back out past tables of customers happily finishing their meal.

This kind of experience, I believe, will become less and less common as restaurateurs are forced to accept that the rules which have governed their profession for the past 200 years no longer apply.

*Larousse Gastronomique*, the indispensable guide to understanding good food, defines restaurants as 'establishments where meals are served between set hours, either from a fixed menu or à la carte'.

Restaurants came into being to restore (*restaurer*) lost strength to their exhausted travelling customers through serving highly flavoured soups and whilst they lost this original function many years ago they have discovered others. Now they face a more critical challenge to their *raison d'être*, one which may involve the demise of restaurants as we have come to know them.

The key phrase and the cause of their potential demise, I believe, is 'between set hours', a formula that even in the best of times is not a financially exciting proposition.

Restaurants conventionally open for lunch between 1200-1400 and for dinner between 1900-2300 seven days a week, although most open for only five or six. Translating that into the language of most commercial operations this means that the sales team - the restaurant and the waiting staff - are generating revenue for a maximum 42 hours a week although probably this is closer to 35/40, less than a quarter of the 168 hours in a week.

Supporting this is a much heavier cost structure. Restaurant kitchens usually operate from 0800-2400, 16 hours a day, 112 hours in a seven-day week. This ratio of a cost of labour to sales basis of 3:1 goes some way to explaining the prices restaurants must charge to survive but it also highlights why restaurants face an uncertain financial future - the maxim of successful manufacturing, of making your assets sweat, cannot be effectively applied.

Restaurateurs have responded by creating hybrids: restaurants with bars attached generate higher spend at lower cost and are busier earlier in the evening and later at night; there may be a café or a shop attached allowing the kitchen's output to be consumed over a longer period during the day and enjoyed off the premises; restaurant kitchens become venues for cookery schools and, increasingly, there are former independent restaurants within hotels as two separate sets of management seek both synergy - whereby guests are attracted to an hotel because of its well known chef - and cost savings whereby the formerly independent kitchen brigade now cook breakfast when traditionally they were closed.

This transformation, underway for the past decade, has been given extra impetus recently by the changes in how we want to eat and the anomaly top restaurateurs face in meeting the demand they have created - do they open for less time simultaneously reducing sales or bite the bullet, open much longer and hope that the business will materialise?

Drew Harri epitomises the international face of the modern restaurateur. A New Zealander who came to Paris and worked under one of England's great exports, Steven Spurrier at Caves de la Madeleine, Harri opened Cosi, an informal self-service restaurant in the sixth *arrondissement* which bakes its own bread into which you put any of a variety of fillings. The philosophy is simple, Harri explains. 'Take something artisanal, put it on a large scale and keep the spirit.'

Harri pinpoints the dilemma for restaurateurs. 'Firstly, no one seems to have any time. Secondly, when you as the restaurateur do provide the space you also have to provide a much more flexible offer, customers want to eat anything or nothing at any time. What is happening today in Paris is similar to what prompted Georges Bardawil to revolutionise eating out in Paris in the 1980s when he opened the L'Ecluse wine bars. He saw that Parisians could no longer afford their own *valet de chambre* so he offered them the same kind of luxury, plates of foie gras, but cut into small slices. Now a restaurateur has to give his customer time, space and choice.'

This is taking place against a wave of rising costs. Whilst the original strictures of France's 35-hour week are being loosened there is no doubt that their application to a profession that barely respects regular hours has had significant repercussions, even if they have admittedly been less serious than those in the health service. To meet this new cost base restaurateurs simply close for the less profitable services as a brief trawl through any French guide will reveal. For these reasons Alain Ducasse's three-star Michelin restaurant in the Plaza Athénée Hotel in Paris is open for only five dinners and two lunches a week.

Whilst this labour cost is particular to France, others are affecting the profitability of restaurateurs on both sides of the Atlantic. Many American restaurateurs agreed to upward only rental increases in the heady days of the late 1990s when business, from both domestic and international travellers, was booming. They like their British counterparts have watched sales fall and costs rise, an unhealthy imbalance as the financial difficulties that have confronted the Le Petit Blanc and Zilli chain of restaurants confirm.

But not far away from Alain Ducasse, restaurateur Mark Williamson has already noticed how his customers are beginning to use his restaurant space in a new way, one that does, I believe, give a foretaste of the service restaurants of the future will provide.

'Parisians will not give up their lunch, it is a daily ritual, but what has been happening for the past year is that our customers have been arriving at their table not just to talk business but with their briefcases, with their papers to conduct business. We are becoming an extension of their office,' he explained.

This is a function which the vast number of new coffee houses has fulfilled around the world primarily in the morning, which restaurateurs will have to offer from lunch to early evening, perhaps with a tea menu, if they want to compete. Technology will also play its part. As well as wine lists and menus, restaurants in future will also have to offer 'hotspots' that will allow their customers to work using their laptops, surfing the net unplugged, before, after or during the meal (a few are on trial in McDonalds and Starbucks in the US and at a couple of branches of Benugo in London).

This slow down in what seemed to be an insatiable demand on the part of individuals for eating out in restaurants has already also forced many restaurateurs to look at two other aspects of their business.

The first is to realise that the primary attractions of their business may not be the food and drink on offer but its location and that rather than wait for individuals to book or not they need to market their space more aggressively. As a result even intimate 40-60 seater restaurants are pursuing the private hire/private party business in a way that many even a year ago would have considered unpalatable (restaurant kitchens, designed to serve tables of 6/8 maximum at once are not easily reconfigured to preparing 50 main course plates simultaneously).

Other restaurateurs have attacked the leisure market. The 'Art Deco' exhibition at the V&A Museum came with an entry ticket tied up with lunch at Conran's Bluebird restaurant on the Fulham Road. Joe Levin, proprietor of The People's Palace in the Royal Festival Hall less than five minutes from the London Eye won the contract that allowed him to offer fixed price lunches or early evening suppers to those who have just seen across the capital from the wheel. This promotion brought in 8500 diners in three months. Levin's analysis was terse, 'We have got to chase customers all the time.'

Restaurants originated with enterprising tradesmen. They have evolved under the skilled management of highly talented chefs and restaurateurs. But their immediate future, I believe, lies more closely in responding to the business and leisure demands of their customers, a future foreseen by Eric Garnier who opened the highly successful Racine last year. 'We made one major mistake last year by closing on Christmas Day and Boxing Day - it really inconvenienced and upset our customers. This year we will be open every single day.' \_

## Restaurant of the Week

Noura, five minutes' walk to the north of Victoria Station, has established a substantial and loyal following amongst lovers of authentic Lebanese food and also, somewhat more surprisingly, amongst London's taxi drivers.

The reasons for the former are quite obvious from the moment you walk into this light, spacious brasserie/restaurant. There are mounds of Lebanese pastries (made in their Knightsbridge pastry shop) stacked immediately by the front door with the open grills for the kebabs in the distance. However, its renown amongst taxi drivers is entirely due to its location on Hobart Place, a hitherto anonymous block between smart Eaton Square and the bottom of Grosvenor Place by

Buckingham Palace. Before Noura opened here in 1999, according to the taxi drivers, no one ever knew where Hobart Place was.

Now firmly established, after the success of four siblings in central Paris, Noura can offer an enormous amount of pleasure because it fulfills so many different roles during its long opening hours from 1030-2330 seven days a week.

It is a convenient place to meet for a quick coffee, a drink at the bar or a hot Lebanese pitta sandwich stuffed with lamb, falafal, chicken or sojok, spicy sausage, late morning. Its mezze, hot and cold, make for an interesting, spicy lunch or as a preamble to the large choice of grills. And, like most other Middle Eastern restaurants, Noura also has a home and business delivery service so there are invariably large boxes of food being carried out to a small white delivery van.

The only real challenge comes when choosing from such a long but invariably highly reliable menu. I particularly like their spicy houmos, moutabaal, kebbehs, quail grilled with coriander, fattoush and lamb chawarma. But I am also a sucker for the sticky Lebanese desserts and their rice pudding not to mention their speciality icecreams made with rosewater, pistachio, apricots or milk and orange blossom.

### **Noura**

16 Hobart Place, London SW1 (tel 020 7235 9444, web [www.noura-brasseries.co.uk](http://www.noura-brasseries.co.uk))

Open 365 days, set lunch £14.50