Kronenhalle Zurich - No Bullshit

23 Nov 2004 by JR

On our way out of Zurich's Kronenhalle restaurant I made a point of aplogising to my guest. Not for the food which had been exactly what we had wanted on a bright autumn day but for my behaviour. I hoped I had not been too abstracted, too lost in thought during our meal. But I had never, I explained, sat directly opposite an original Braque for so long in my life.

And if that were not enough to distract me there were several others by Chagall, Rodin and Bonnard in the smaller diningroom where we sat and others by Matisse and Giacometti in the main, albeit noisier room. All this after we had met in the small intimate bar next door in an alcove overlooked by paintings by Miro and Picasso. At the end of our meal my brain was overloaded with colour and images and trying to choose which particular painting I would most like to sit under when I return (it's the Matisse still life with oysters, half way down the room on the left).

I am not the first to fall for Kronenhalle's charms. Its art collection, begun decades ago by an obviously farsighted member of the family, is justifiably famous but then so too is its approach to how it looks after you. And it is this approach which prompted one highly respected restaurateur, London's Mark Birley, to confide in me that Kronenhalle is his favourite restaurant in the world. 'Because' he explained leaning across the table and lowering his voice, 'there's no bullshit.'

Nor has there been any obvious attempt, other than in the computer consoles, to drag Kronenhalle needlessly into the 21st century. The waiters still wear white shirts, jackets and black ties and the few waitresses rather formless black dresses. There is a thoughtfully placed open coat rack which runs across the room and away from the front door so that the customers can take their coats off in comfort (particularly useful in winter) and an open dispense bar running across the far wall with an equally ancient NCR machine which still prints the bills.

Kronenhalle continues to charm because it maintains the correct relationship between the kitchen and the waiting staff who have not, as in so many other restaurants, been reduced to plate carriers and bottle openers. The food, with the exception of the desserts, is carried out in stainless steel or copper dishes and then served at a side table. Soups are served from a tureen; herring is served only after the apple purée, sour cream, onions and chives have been combined and about half the hefty main courses are served and then reheated and reoffered just in case you possess a truly gargantuan appetite. Their rosti, that great Swiss combination of grated onion and potato, are at least eight inches in diameter and are replaced with alacrity whilst the vast copper dish on the trolley holding the goulash [that was the dish of the day] was as highly polished as the base of any percussion instrument of a leading orchestra.

Orsini, across the river in the heart of the financial and shopping district and part of the Hotel Savoy Baur en Ville, proves however that eating in a restaurant without anything on its walls can be just as exciting.

Manfred Hörger has striven during his 19 years as general manager of the hotel to understand precisely what his guests require. The series of dining and meeting rooms offer an extraordinary combination of privacy, security and secluded entrances but the restaurant demands a more subtle approach. 'I don't want my customers to see quality,' he explained, 'I want them to feel it.'

Orsini therefore conveys the simple elegance the top restaurants in Italy exude. A low opaque glass division halves the low-ceilinged room, originally built in the 14th century as a home for the priest of the adjacent church. Flowers fill the windows while a single palm guards the entrance. There is no overt design statement. The room is there for you to enjoy the food, wine and conversation.

Which is what we did with suitably classic dishes: agnolotti with goats cheese and spaghetti with lobster; excellent renditions of calves' liver 'alla Venezia' and 'tournedos Rossini' and their own speciality dessert 'scoleda dimitri', a bowl of strawberries and vanilla icecream quickly softened and browned under the grill - a dish to please anyone from eight to eighty.

Orsini's wine prices will equally please wine lovers as, even in Swiss francs, they are reasonable and in certain cases such as Krug champagne and Tignanello 1997 far cheaper than London, New York or Milan. But a fixed cash mark-up is, Hörger insists, also part of restaurant psychology. 'I know my customers. They are invariably well-off but they are not

ostentatious. If a wine is seen as being too expensive then they don't want it on their table, they don't want to be seen drinking it.'

These two Zurich restaurants had unexpectedly provided lessons in art history and restaurant psychology that were not included in the bill.

Restaurant Kronenhalle
Ramistrasse 4, 8001 Zurich (tel +41 1 251 02 56)
Open 7 days

Orsini
Am Münsterhof 25, Zurich (tel +41 1 215 2727, web www.savoy-baurenville.ch)

Restaurant of the Week

The Restaurant at Bevis Marks which has just opened next door to the Bevis Marks synagogue built in 1701 when nearby Bishopsgate was less congested than it is today should ensure that the unlikely combination of synagogue and restaurant attract an even bigger audience.

The restaurant naturally is kosher (all dishes are entirely dairy free and the kitchen is licensed by the Sephardi Kashrut Authority) but anyone who recalls the rather grimy and dingy outposts that were London's previous kosher restaurants, most notably Isow's and Bloom's, will be in for a pleasant surprise.

The diningroom is light and bright, having been attached to the far external wall of the synagogue by a glass conservatory and all the interior, from the take-away counter at the front to the staircase at the back, are clean, simple and modern. Only the close proximity of the tables may preclude those who want to discuss a potential major takeover.

The menu follows the same sympathetic principles which allow it to incorporate some more unusual dishes: French kosher charcuterie; seared foie gras with caramelised pears and a confit of duck with a sour cherry sauce.

Then there are the staples which will inevitably be compared to everyone's Jewish grandmother or mother's rendition: chicken soup with matzo balls; boiled gefilte fish with horseradish; chopped liver with spiced apple compote and, happily, for salt beef lovers who have only had Selfridge's as a source for their fix, traditional, lean salt beef with excellent chips and horseradish relish. Best of all, and likely to appeal to any adventurous diner, was a dish of grilled ox-tongue with diced beetroot.

Service was prompt - spoilt only by a rather petty comment that 'we don't serve tap water' - and my hunch is that the kitchen will deliver stronger flavours with time. Jewish grandmothers had, after all, the benefit of many years of experience.

The Restaurant at Bevis Marks
London EC3 (tel 020 7283 2220)
lunch Monday to Friday, and for bar food 1730-1930 Monday-Thursday, approx £25 three courses without wine