Chez Denise, Les Halles, Paris and the birth of Californian Cookery

23 Nov 2004 by JR

Smokers to the right, smokers to the left. All around are red-and-white checked napkins and tablecloths; on the walls *inter alia* are pictures of Oscar Wilde and a photo of the singer George Brassens whilst above electric fans continually whirl rather precariously on thick wooden beams.

Welcome to Les Halles, Paris, *le vrai Paris* for meat lovers and anyone who wants to eat anything at any time in the early morning. But Chez Denise, across the small park from the main part of Les Halles and no more than a ten-minute stroll from the Pompidou Centre, is a far less touristy outpost.

Denise stands at the door by upturned wine barrels, a small zinc bar where the local gendarmerie call in for a soft drink and hams and salami hang from the ceiling dividing the bar from the intimate restaurant at the rear.

At either end of the room, around which run thick, well worn, comfortable red leather banquettes, are two sets of two blackboards which illustrate all that is on offer. The one on the left lists the dishes that have been served for decades: fillets of herring with a potato salad; terrines; steaks and French wines by the litre and half-litre which have only changed with the vinatge.

The second blackboard lists the daily specials: asparagus vinaigrette, and several fish dishes, skate wing with capers and a hefty serving of smoked haddock with boiled potatoes.

But whilst happily more and more restaurants are serving less expensive cuts of meat such as calves liver, *onglet* and kidneys which have been on this menu for decades two dishes were exceptional. Both, *boeuf au gros sel*, slow-cooked brisket with carrots, leeks and potatoes, served with sea salt, and *haricots au mouton*, chunks of lamb with haricot beans, are served in gratin dishes designed for one but could easily serve two or even more.

Go hungry.

Chez Denise, Restaurant a la Tour de Montlhery
5, rue des Prouvaires, 75001 Paris (tel 01 42 36 21 82)

_ Jeremiah Tower - *California Dish*

I picked up Jeremiah Tower's *California Dish - what I saw (and cooked) at the American Culinary Revolution* with as much anticipation as if I were sitting down for a meal in one of his restaurants.

Tower shot to recognition in the early 1970s as the chef behind Alice Waters at Chez Panisse in Berkeley before moving on to open Stars, where he remorselessly points out 'le tout San Francisco' wanted to eat and then the less successful Speedo 690.

During this period Tower laid the foundations for what is now recognised as California cuisine: the use of the freshest, seasonal produce and of the grill as the primary culinary tool; a desire to dispense with sauces which often mask the ingredients innate flavours and goodness and above all the intention to ensure the customer leaves the table replete but not stuffed, ready for another few hours in the Californian sunshine. I hoped his book would have the same effect.

The extent to which Tower has influenced American cooking is evinced by the fact that the book carries a ringing endorsement from New York's Danny Meyer who usually reserves his public pronouncements for the charitable causes he supports. When I asked Meyer about this he explained, 'The book is very much Tower's perspective although it often reads like a car accident in the making. You know when you see an accident you have mixed feelings, on one hand to avert your eyes and on the other to look. That's the feeling I had throughout.'

Certainly, there are numerous occasions when Tower behaves as badly as those he accuses of letting him down although this is tempered by his own admission that he fully deserves the epithet 'difficult' he was awarded at the outset of his career. But perhaps the biggest historical revelation in the book is the hugely influential role that Guildford, Surrey,

played in the creation of Californian cuisine.

Tower was the youngest in a family which in the late 1940s and early 1950s travelled the world in great style thanks to his father's job as international managing director of Western Electric. His formative years involved first-class stays in grand hotels and on equally grand liners and Tower was introduced to restaurants at an early stage. At Chez Prunier, then the classiest restaurant in Sydney, he had special dispensation to fall asleep between the main course and dessert.

But it was the vegetable garden of the Guildford house (where the family settled in the mid-1950s) which he, his mother and the gardeners tended with such love that instilled in Tower the importance, bordering on reverence, for produce. There were no big ideas like 'organic' or 'pesticide-free': just manure, ploughing under and double digging, with Tower's imagination fired by his mother's dictum that plants had to be fed a lot before we eat them.

And it was here too that Tower learnt to organise himself and others to cook for numbers. This extraordinary talent was subsequently to establish his reputation at Chez Panisse, Stars, at the press lunch in Beechwood, Rhode Island in 1983 when he outshone the French chef Guy Savoy and gave the press California cuisine to write about, and at scores of charitable events across the US.

Tower is at pains to point out that his mother was not an alcoholic but that she did have trouble metabolising her second martini, a weakness when you have just invited 100 to lunch. Aged 14, young Tower would then step in and finish off the meal, poaching and presenting wild Scottish salmon, carving and slicing legs of mutton and grilled steak and preparing the vinaigrette for the green bean salad.

This Guildford education would imbue Tower with the confidence to take on the chef's job at Chez Panisse and imbue its kitchen with the purchasing discipline that was to establish its professional reputation which allowed *Gourmet* magazine readers to vote it the best restaurant in America in 2001.

In retrospect, the events which comprise the chapter 'Three women called Alice' are extraordinary. Initially, Waters could not see Tower at the time scheduled for his interview but he hung around because the round trip fare had used up a third of his money in the world. Tower was then asked to prove his culinary credentials by finishing a soup that was to be served that night and he did so by adding not just salt but white wine and cream, surprising in all that California cuisine was to stand for. His starting salary was $400 a month.

But whilst Tower does spend too much time bitching about the lack of recognition Waters has subsequently shown him (without once recognising that he never intended to stay for long, often seeing it as a job en route to Hawaii) the early years of Chez Panisse also reveal his genius at instilling a restaurant with a unique identity. It was Tower who took Waters' idea of a set four- or five-course dinner and gave them life: a Brittany dinner; a Sauternes dinner; menus based around Curnonsky and Escoffier and a Champagne dinner which involved bringing 100 live trout in a huge tank from Big Sur on a flatbed truck into the kitchen and then killing them just before cooking. Not surprisingly, this dish was never repeated but each of these special menus stoked demand, generated press coverage and allowed them to charge a little bit more.

This genius, coupled with the singlemindedness to fight for six years for the downtown site (close to the city centre) he spotted as San Francisco's answer to Paris's Brasserie Lipp, were the reasons behind Stars' success. Equally important was his determination not to waver from what was the late Joe Baum's motto for a restaurant's success: 'new-old food in a new-new setting' (Baum was the genius behind New York's Four Seasons restaurant). Perhaps Stars could have ridden out Tower's brinkmanship approach to finance and management but it could not eventually withstand the combination of the 1989 earthquake, AIDS litigation or the economic downturn of the early 1990s.

California Dish is exciting and highly illuminating. If it had been better edited (why do recipes suddenly disappear mid-way through the book?) and written with the generosity of spirit with which Tower cooked and obviously drank, it could have been great.

Published by Free Press. US$25, £15