New, and some old, Paris restaurants

23 Nov 2004 by JR

Without wishing this to sound like a shaggy dog story, the following three Paris restaurant recommendations came from an American, a Brazilian and a Frenchman. And the brevity of each report is in inverse proportion to the enormous pleasure each particular restaurant offered.

Chez Michel, which I learnt of from flicking through the Zagat survey of Europe's top restaurants, is precisely three minutes' walk from the Gare du Nord although like an increasing number of restaurants across France it is closed on Saturday, Sunday and Monday lunch (its cheaper sibling, **Chez Casimir**, ten metres away, is open on Saturday night).

And the only word to describe Chez Michel's interior is unprepossessing. It, and chef Thierry Breton, proclaim their Breton association with a model blue lighthouse by the front door and a large oil painting of the port of Honfleur on the far wall, but these seem to be the limit of any obvious investment in fixtures and fittings. And our waiter, who spoke excellent English, was as casually dressed as any customer.

The concentration is on the food. As soon as you are shown to your table you are presented with a bowl of bulots, small cockles to be extracted with a pin, and mustardy mayonnaise, an extremely fairly priced menu (30 euros for three courses), a well chosen wine list (including Breton beers and ciders), and a blackboard which lists all the daily specials.

What is most exciting is that the list of specials not only exceeds the number of the dishes on the menu but that both reek of autumn. The blackboard offered grouse, French partridge, wild duck, wild boar and hare while the dessert menu was studded with variations on quince including a tarte Tatin of apples and quince. Chez Michel offers an object lesson in menu writing for any chef wanting to follow the best of French culinary tradition.

And in presentation, too. The fish soup is served not in bowls but in a large decorative jug that is left on the table. A fillet of wild sea bass *en croûte* came with thin slices of fennel between the fish and the pastry and a thick fennel purée in a small copper pan. The rice pudding - described as in the style of one's grandmother but in fact much richer than any grandmother would have made - arrived in a large bowl, enough for two, with their own *compôte* of fruits.

In complete contrast, **Le Violon d'Ingres** in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower reeks of highly polished design. And also, if you happen to get a table at the far end of its long, thin diningroom just by the kitchen, there is the added bonus of the almost intoxicating smells from a kitchen obviously intent on extracting every last iota of flavour from the ingredients it is preparing.

Christian Constant has been the chef here for the past five years since making his mark at The Crillon and some think he is now cooking better than ever. Any fan of the painter Ingres would also feel happy here as the walls and menu bear homage to the artist. And anyone who feels, like me, that Saturday lunch is the best meal of the week should note that this restaurant is open Saturday lunch and dinner but closed Sunday and Monday.

Because our guest was late (the restaurant is quite a walk from the nearest metro) we perused the menu so intently that we became indecisive. Torn between *papillotes* of langoustine, a tarte Tatin of pigs trotters and an ossobuco of monkfish, we eventually settled for the 39 euro *menu de saison*: a *pithiviers* of game, then a choice of five scallops in their shells or a spatchcocked woodpigeon cooked on the grill with diced garlic and finally a stunning coffee and chocolate tart with vanilla icecream.

Le Violon d'Ingres distinguished itself in two other respects. The first was its ameuse-bouche, a creamy, crunchy soup of lentils (an ingredient I go out of my way to avoid) and its wine list put together by an almost juvenile looking sommelier. This included not only a large range of very good wines by the glass but also several unusual French wines including two 2001 Anjou reds, respectively and unusually 'A Norbert' and 'A Vincent'. The former, made from Cabernet Franc, was 72 francs and gave great pleasure.

Finally, to **Seize au Seize** in the 16th *arrondissement* at the end of the week in which its chef, the 28-year-old Frédéric Simonin had just been dubbed 'the best young chef in Paris' although, as we were soon to appreciate, his pastry chef, François Bonot, is equally talented.

This restaurant is part of the burgeoning second empire of Joël Robuchon but shares none of the innovation of the recently hyped L'Atelier du Robuchon. Seize au Seize occupies an independent corner site (rather than being part of an hotel) with plenty of natural light; takes bookings; has evolved a highly sophisticated but relaxed interior design and lighting, and, most fortuitously, is directly opposite a *boulangerie* with whom Simonin has worked to produce first-class, crisp bread rolls for the restaurant.

Seize au Seize shares Robuchon's fascination for Spanish food in its first courses which are served as small tasting dishes. Best of the six we tasted were a fricassé of frogs' legs with girolle mushrooms, a watercress soup poured from a sauce boat into a pale green bowl in which lay a scoop of crème frâiche topped with caviar; and a stunningly fresh tart of the freshest vegetables, the kind of dish more often associated with chefs in Italy or California.

Main courses include line-caught sea bass, John Dory and halibut, sweetbreads spiked with apricots and almond milk and that great classic, *lièvre à la royale*, a dish that requires cooking the hare for 12 hours and was executed with a sense of experience that belied Simonin's tender years. Bonot has fun with a Bailey's soufflé, a rich chocolate dessert that incorporates an Oreo biscuit but is at his best with three variatons on pistachio, a neapolitan, a mousseline and an icecream.

The wine list, collated by Claude Douard, who put together some of London's finest lists during the 1990s, is world-class not just in its contents but also in how it is displayed. Douard believes that the only criterion for comparison, wherever in the world wines originate from, is price - so the wines are listed simply in ascending price order. It is a shock to see top Californian chardonnays listed more expensively than several Puligny and Chassagne Montrachets and the best of Chablis.

Perhaps we were unduly fortunate in finding three such exciting restaurants. But I think that there may be more than just luck involved. The current, rather heavy-handed criticism of seemingly every aspect of French cooking is as far off the mark as any generalistion - Paris still seems to have a great deal to offer the enthusiastic restaurant goer.

Chez Michel, 10 rue de Belzunce, 10th *arrondissement* (tel 01 44 53 06 20)
Chez Casimir, 6 rue de Belzunce (tel 01 48 78 28 80)
Le Violin d'Ingres, 135 rue Saint Dominique, 7th *arrondissement* (tel 01 45 55 15 05)
Seize au Seize, 16 avenue Bugeaud, 16th *arrondissement* 01.56.28.16.16

Restaurant Of The Week

Unknown to geologists there must be a particular gastronomic plate which runs directly underneath the north side of Knightsbridge and Piccadilly and ends just by Green Park Tube station. The manifestation is three excellent sushi restaurants.

The most westerly and the most recent is Zuma (020-584 1010) by Knightsbridge Green. In the centre overlooking Hyde Park is the phenomenally popular Nobu (020-74447-4747) where sitting at the sushi bar is always an epicurean delight. Finally, tucked away down Clarges Street is the grandfather of them all, **Miyama**, which sliced its first sushi back in 1982.

By comparison with the millions that have been lavished on the interior of the others, Miyama intially appears rather dowdy. A very proper, albeit smiling, Japanese gentleman in dinner jacket takes your coat and hands you over to a couple of waitresses in colourful kimonos whose sandals clatter along the tiled floor. Past the shelves with the customary display of whisky bottles there are a dozen potted palms and ferns which separate the tables and the very diverse customers.

There is an entire Japanese family; an English mother and daughter; four young Japanese; a table of Greek businessmen and several other tables of Mayfair businessmen and women. The Japanese business contingent tend to prefer the private rooms.

They are drawn by Miyama's menu of vast proportions but continually high standards. At lunch the set price deals for sushi, sashimi and the beef teriyaki plates are £12-14 while there are ten less expensive noodle dishes.

But the highlight is the sushi chefs who execute an extensive and none too expensive à la carte menu. We ordered not inconsiderable portions of sushi and sashimi - mackerel, eel, flying fish roe, turbot, cuttlefish, salmon fish roe and toro, the choice cut from the fat underbelly of the tuna - and with fortifying miso soup, tea and mineral water the bill came to £67 for two.

And, because this is a little corner of Japan, this included exquisitely attentive and friendly service.

Miyama, 38 Clarges Street, London W1 (tel 020 74923 3807)
Lunch Monday-Friday, Dinner Monday-Sunday