

Taillevent - celebrating 60 years

26 Nov 2006 by Business Life/Nick Lander

My reasons for choosing to review Taillevent restaurant in Paris were initially quite flippant. Although I would be the first to admit that restaurant correspondents are the last people to deserve a Christmas treat I thought that one more meal at this quite exceptional Paris restaurant would not be anything other than pure pleasure.

But as I was held in the queue to make my booking I learnt something far more important. 2006 is the 60th anniversary of this restaurant which has been in the same location for all that time; has been run continuously by the Vrinat family, at first by André, and then since September 3rd 1972 by his son Jean-Claude who have, perhaps most unusually, only employed six different Head Chefs during the entire period.

And most notably for that entire period it has maintained the very highest standards. Taillevent is one of 22 restaurants awarded three Michelin stars in France but, more pertinently, it is the only one where the leading light is the restaurateur rather than the chef. The stars of the others are all in the kitchen: Alain Ducasse in Monaco and Paris; the Haerberlin family in Illhausen, Alsace; and Michel Troisgros in Roanne. Set against these titans of the kitchen in this particular instance is the ever smiling Jean-Claude Vrinat, immaculately dressed in his suit and with his red ribbon of the Chevalier de l'Ordre d'Honneur ever present in the lapel of his suit.

And sixty years is a remarkably long time to maintain such standards in such a business that is not only gruelling – one stalwart compares it to being on the stage performing a matinee and evening performance every day of the week – but also one that has become increasingly fashionable. (During this period, I reckon, Taillevent has put on 30,000 performances – more than *The Mousetrap*). Taillevent has bucked such trends by eschewing fashion although this visit revealed that its interior has had a major redesign with more contemporary light fittings introduced into the mainly wood panelled interior. And this anniversary has resulted in one more obvious, albeit short-term, change, a new menu.

Well, not exactly new because if Taillevent were ever to change the design of its menu then I think it would lose many of its faithful clientele. But just how thoughtful and tasteful the design of this menu cum wine list is, is testament to the accumulated expertise of the Vrinat family.

Shortly after you have been ushered into the extremely plush ground floor dining room which seats about 60 (there are a couple of private dining rooms upstairs where numerous prestigious wine dinners take place) and within seconds of being handed some warm cheese gougjons to munch on, a large four page card is handed to you. For 59 years this menu has carried the images of food printed from old woodcuts to whet your appetite but this year these have been replaced by the simple outline of a fork to announce the restaurant's birthday. But the classic layout remains. On the front page are the starters and main courses and on the back page the desserts while the centre two pages display those wines from the restaurant's exceptional wine cellar Vrinat judges are ready to drink (no 2002 burgundies yet, for example). What this means is that everyone at the table has a menu and the wine list at the same time and the table is not cluttered with a heavy wine list which only one person can ever read at one time.

It is just as well that the table remains uncluttered because pretty soon there are plates and glasses everywhere. Alain Solivèrés has been the chef at Taillevent for the past four years and has now stamped a distinct mark on a restaurant that derives its name from the nickname for Guillaume Tirel, a chef to the kings of France in the 14th century. Our meal began

with a small bowl of risotto made not from rice but spelt topped with tiny girolles and then moved on at a studied pace to include a crème brûlée of foie gras enriched, as if it needed it with finely diced almonds (fèves de Tonka); perfectly cooked fillets of sea bass and red mullet and a wonderful bowl of warm mirabelles topped with pastry which was removed to allow an ice cold sorbet to be added. Light, simple and earthy were the adjectives I would use to describe Solivèrés' cooking but two dishes stood out. The first was simple – a wheel of the freshest crab meat topped with finely sliced radishes – and essentially called for nothing but the finest ingredients. The second, a thin pastry base topped with diced wild mushrooms, slices of ceps and ham and the kernels of wet walnuts demanded the highest technical skills combined with the dexterity of a surgeon.

Taillevent's other great distinction, its wine cellar, has for decades been home to the great wines of France. But Jean-Claude Vrinat is also a great champion of the best from his native country's less expensive areas including the Languedoc, Corsica and Provence and we began our meal with an excellent Tissot chardonnay from the Jura which cost £35.

A la carte, Taillevent is expensive, around 150 euros for three courses, but there is a 75 euro lunch menu and Vrinat has also opened the less expensive, more casual L'Angle du Faubourg round the corner with many an imported wine on its inventive list. But this, after all, is Christmas.

Taillevent, 15 rue Lammenais, 75008 Paris

www.taillevent.com

Closed weekends.

Chef of the month

Anthony Demetre, Arbutus, 63/64 Frith Street, Soho, London W1, 020-7734 4545, www.arbutusrestaurant.com

Anthony Demetre is the chef and partner, with his manager Will Smith, of Arbutus which opened to great critical acclaim last summer. This reception was not just for Arbutus's keen prices, particularly their lunch and pre-theatre menus, but also for the terrific flavours Demetre coaxes from such dishes as poached and roast chicken with tarragon gnocchi, sea bream with buttered leeks and a warm chocolate soup with pecan nuts.

[Arbutus has, since Nick wrote this way back for a glossy magazine's deadlines, been made Newcomer of the Year by the Time Out guide, and best new restaurant in the Remy Martin Awards - JR.]