

What to do with an appetite in Paris

11 Dec 2006 by FT/Nick Lander

Our evening at the Bistrot Paul-Bert in Paris's 11th arrondissement, not far from the Bastille, was memorable for many reasons.

Our friends, who had defied my wife's instructions and booked here rather than at the Baratin in the 20th, were in good form. The menu is terrific and great value at 30 euros a head with the odd supplement and so too is the wine list which contains a host of gems from across the French vineyards as well as some older bottles of Gaston Huet's Vouvray Moelleux from the 1959, 1947 and 1945 vintages at the not ridiculous prices of 265, 420 and 490 euros per bottle respectively.

But I will remember the evening, above all, for one scene that greeted me as I walked through the first room of the restaurant, past the bar and towards our table. In the far corner was a table for two, a young couple, who were looking at the menu which is carefully written on a large blackboard carried around the room and hung on convenient hooks on the restaurant's cast iron columns, or in the case of our table, on the coat rack. They were giving their order to a young, rather callow-looking waiter (who, I was to discover, knew his menu and wine list inside out). As he took their order he was leaning casually against the mirrored wall with his legs crossed, order pad and pen in hand.

This vignette seemed to me to illustrate perfectly the sheer matter-of-fact pleasure of eating wonderfully well in France, something that is not, fortunately, confined to France but still seems to strike a deeper chord here than anywhere else. It was a scene that would have graced the late Cartier-Bresson's Leica.

There are numerous other appealing aspects of this bistrot, which also has the word Restaurant painted under one of its beams in faded brown paint, the same colour that was obviously used to paint the word Cuisine above the hatch through which the chefs pass their well-executed dishes. The walls are dotted with mirrors, old black and white photos, a colour painting of the Paris Brest dessert for which the kitchen is justifiably renowned and the sum of all this, plus the fact that the bistrot is spread across two rooms, means that it is not too noisy (there is, of course, no music playing) even when it is full which, on the basis of what we ate, it should be all the time.

The main focus of attention, however, is the blackboard and what it offers. We began with three scallops roasted in their shells; a warm salad of tongue; melting morsels of black pudding wrapped in crisp filo pastry with a sharp apple puree; and a most unusual dish: a carpaccio of very thinly sliced calves kidneys topped with equally thin slices of hazelnuts and mushrooms. The chef states his opinion quite openly about how his meat dishes will arrive with a line on the blackboard that reads 'the meat dishes will be served blue, rare or badly cooked', but our young waiter proved to be quite accommodating when taking our order for calves liver, a vast piece of onglet (skirt or hanger steak) and a thick slice of hare

à la royale which carried only a 4 euro supplement that seemed scant recompense for all the preparation that has to go into this French classic. The other desserts were as rich and sweet as the Paris Brest, round choux pastry filled with praline flavoured cream created to commemorate the cycle race between the two cities, and included a crème brûlée with chestnuts, with chestnut purée replacing the traditional cream, which would be ideal for anyone looking to finish the meal with a digestif.

Another inexpensive discovery, this time on the Left Bank and thanks to a tip-off from Jean Louis Galesne, my counterpart on Les Echos, was Ribouldingue on the left bank in the shadow of Notre-Dame, whose three course menu is even better value at 27 euros.

Ribouldingue's dining room is straight and narrow, reminiscent of an old-fashioned railway carriage, with about 20 small tables on either side of the central corridor and a small kitchen at the far end. This, the white table cloths and the generous flower arrangements come as a pleasant surprise in an area where most eating establishments are there to feed tourists rather than diners.

The management's approach is serious – for example, they ask for the dessert order at the same time as the starter and main course – but without taking itself seriously. The result is a very correct and enjoyable experience where our meal for three with a couple of bottles of wine came to 147 euros. Two first courses were excellent, a celeriac and chestnut soup served in a large tureen that could have easily fed two, and three ravioli of oxtail. And while the main courses includes several of the inexpensive cuts of meat, such as tripe in a white wine sauce, braised beef cheeks and sweetbreads with endives, which allow French chefs to deliver menus at prices that restaurant goers in London or New York would hanker after, the kitchen showed its more modern side with a dish of grilled squid with olives, tomato and diced celery. A great deal of thought has obviously gone into the restaurant's hand-written wine list, from which we chose a surprisingly full white Roussette de Savoie 2003 and a rather tired red Arbois 2002.

The good news for any fish lover who may feel justifiably neglected by these two recommendations is that although Bistrot Paul Bert's menu included a couple of fish main courses, the same family runs L'Ecailler du Bistrot two doors away, where the approach is just as traditional but the emphasis is entirely on fish. In fact, walking past and spotting the oysters, sea urchins and line-caught sea bass on its blackboard menu, I almost turned in here as my companions walked on and into the Bistrot Paul Bert.

Back on the Left Bank, and round the corner from Joel Robuchon's L'Atelier, is Pierre Gagnaire Gaya whose ultra-modern interior demonstrates a completely new and different aspect to the city's restaurants. The menu's layout encompasses half a dozen dishes under headings such as 'something to whet your appetite', oysters, 'mer noble' and 'mer modeste'. Perhaps it was a combination of the small print and dim lighting upstairs that induced us to eat conventionally starting with a terrine of skate and an excellent crab soup and moving on to fillets of brill with lime, langoustines with coco beans and a daube of octopus with black olives and Swiss chard. This was a meal that was stimulating and encompassed some fine cooking but not every dish, particularly the desserts, was successful. Our bill for four came to 370 euros with a bottle of 2004 Ostertag Riesling and one of Cuilleron St Joseph Rouge from the same vintage.

Bistrot Paul Bert, 18 rue Paul Bert, 75011 Paris, tel: 01.43.72.24.01.

Closed Sunday and Monday.

L'Ecailler du Bistrot, 20-22 rue Paul Bert, tel: 01.43.72.76.77. Closed Sunday and Monday.

Ribouldingue, 10 rue Saint Julien le Pauvre, Paris 75005, tel: 01.46.33.98.80. Closed Sunday and Monday.

Gaya par Pierre Gagnaire, 44 rue du Bac, 75007, tel 01.45.44.73.73. Closed Sunday.

