

## Paris restaurants to cross town for

2 May 2007 by FT/Nick Lander

A fortnight ago, New York restaurateur Danny Meyer was in London to give a talk on the philosophy of enlightened hospitality which he expounds in his book 'Setting the Table' to a gathering of London's chefs and restaurateurs.

I subsequently had the pleasure of introducing Meyer to Sir Andrew Likierman, currently Acting Dean of the London Business School and someone who has specialised in all aspects of performance management. Their conversation initially revolved around the notion that it was possible to determine a well-run restaurant by observing the eyes of the customers. If they were focused on one another rather than darting about the room trying to attract a waiter's attention then it could, the theory goes, be accurately assumed that the restaurateur and his staff were doing their jobs correctly.

Likierman then turned to the subject of a 'favourite restaurant', citing the food, welcome and recognition at Didier Garnier's **Le Colombier** in Chelsea as a trio of reasons why he and his wife regularly cross London to eat there. With this analysis Meyer could find no fault. Despite all the complimentary comment cards or even the awards any restaurant may receive the acid test is how often and how swiftly regular customers return.

I recalled this conversation several days later at the end of an excellent meal in **Le Meurice** in Paris where Yannick Alleno is the chef. It was my first meal there but undoubtedly one of the best I have ever had. I could not afford to eat there as regularly as I would like (dinner for four with three bottles of wine was 1,150 euros) but walking out on to the Rue de Rivoli into the sultry midnight air I could not help thinking that, bank balance and location permitting, this is one restaurant I would very much like to return to.

That we all came away feeling this way is a great testimony to Alleno's cooking and his restaurant team because the room itself does not exude such warmth. It can best be described as 'Late Empire' with a mosaic floor, four large chandeliers, huge mirrors and metres of pink material up to its high ceilings. Intimate it is not and, as though to accentuate this, its 15 tables are arranged in serried ranks across the room and the air conditioning can be fierce.

By contrast, however, the entire management team and waiting staff are young, extremely keen and sensitive enough to appreciate that anyone who has been lucky enough to get a table here has not done so to listen to them talk.

Alleno's menu and its contents do that most eloquently. We were fortunate enough to arrive on the second day of his new spring menu which will last for about the next two months. With its heavy emphasis on the new season's vegetables, still too rare in top French restaurants, it screamed freshness to such an extent that I found myself suggesting the tasting menu, something that would not have tested the kitchen as extensively as I would have wanted, at least professionally. But it did contain some delicious ingredients: morel mushrooms; Robert Blanc's asparagus, sea bass and that most aromatic strawberry variety, the early ripening gariguettes.

Having thwarted me on that score, my fellow diners then ignored my request to order different first courses with all of them choosing what I also had my eye on, morel mushrooms steamed with vin jaune, the distinctively sherry-like wine of the Jura, with two of them looking no further than the turbot as a main course because it too was served with morel mushrooms. I would at least enjoy these mushrooms alongside a poached fillet of veal with a spelt (épautres) risotto.

There then followed a sequence of dishes which brought a smile to our faces and put paid to our rumbling stomachs. An appetiser of two small green pea gnocchi was followed by the intensely sauced morels and an artfully constructed cube of smoked salmon wrapped in scallop inside a thin, crisp pastry cube topped with caviar. Two thick slices of turbot arrived and were impeccably taken off the bone and served with an array of white spring turnips and a deep green herb sauce. The sea bass in 'a green jacket' turned out to be a plump fillet that had been wrapped in the green leaves of young spring garlic and came with broad beans while the veal had been carefully poached in a luscious veal stock. As well as the precise cooking, what distinguished the meal was the fact that Alleno obviously does not have a problem with leaving the salt and pepper on the tables for customers to add their own and that each main course was served with a silver jug of its particular sauce which was then left on the table to be finished off, in my case, with some bread.

Camille Lesecq maintains the same entertaining approach with the desserts, most notably a plate of halved strawberries topped with triangles of a thin lemon soufflé with vanilla Normandy cream and a row of small pearls of red fruits to the side. Only the wine list, too old-fashioned and confusingly listing dry and sweet whites together, hits the wrong note.

While Alleno has been honing his obvious skills, Alain Ducasse has been resuscitating yet another long-established but recently neglected French bistro following his company's success with Aux Lyonnais and Benoit, this time **Rech**, an oyster bar and fish restaurant established in the 17<sup>th</sup> arrondissement in 1925.

Rech is unusual in that unlike so many Parisian brasseries specialising in seafood it does not occupy a corner site. But it does have that quintessential intimate air both on the ground floor and the more formal restaurant upstairs where the lack of air conditioning is an obvious sign of age.

But for any dedicated fish lover this should not be a disincentive. Our table of six ordered two 'plateaux royaux de fruits de mer' (56 euros for 2) and momentarily felt like calling for the bill straight after as the various oysters, langoustines, clams, crab and shrimps were so good and so copious. But we gamely stayed for some excellent turbot, sea bass, skate and sole and for the eight inch chocolate éclair that has been Rech's signature dessert for the past 82 years.

### Restaurants to cross town for

**Le Meurice**, 228 rue de Rivoli, Paris, 01.44.58.10.10, [www.lemeurice.com](http://www.lemeurice.com)

Open Monday-Friday lunch and dinner.

**Rech**, 62 Avenue des Ternes, Paris 75017, 01.45.72.29.47

**Le Colombier**, 145 Dovehouse Street, London SW3, 020-7351 1155,

**Cameleon**, 6 rue de Chavreuse, Paris 75006, 01.43.27.43.27. Excellent cooking at reasonable prices.

**Le Parc aux Cerfs**, 50 rue Vavin, Paris 75006, 01.43.54. 87.83, with its very well-chosen list.