

Putting the world to rights over tête de veau

14 Jun 2007 by Nick Lander/FT

During the brief interregnum between Presidents Chirac and Sarkozy in Paris, I received a phone call from another French president, Pierre Rival. Rival, who combines a job in new technology in the city's Town Hall with writing about food for Les Echos and is the author of 'The Gourmet Shops of Paris', is however self-appointed and his jurisdiction is much, much smaller. Rival is the unelected President of the Tête de Veau Society.

Tête de Veau, or calf's head, for those who do not know this dish or in fact may not want to read any further, is summarily described by Larousse Gastronomique as 'a gelatinous variety of white offal'. It is prepared, classically and simply, by cooking the calf's head in a white court-bouillon seasoned with cloves and a bouquet garni, allowing it to simmer gently for a couple of hours. The dish is presented by carving the various parts of the head – cheek, tongue, brain and ear – into smaller pieces and then serving them, alongside a quenelle of veal and a crouton, in a tomato sauce laced with Madeira, capers and olives. For centuries this is a dish that has been an integral part not just of French bourgeois cooking but also of that of several eastern European countries.

Rival was calling me to see whether I would like to attend an unusual second annual gathering of this society. Normally, it meets to eat during the latter part of January when the weather suits this type of hearty food but there was going to be another celebration of this dish to coincide with the publication of Rival's new novel, 'Alimentation générale' (Flammarion, 14 euros). This novel opens with the sentence 'Paul Rebell loves tête de veau', includes on page 135 full details of all that is needed to prepare it, and takes Rebell, the book's hero, and the reader on a tour of several Parisian restaurants.

I accepted eagerly not just because I enjoy gelatinous white offal but also because the dinner was going to be held at Le Coq de la Maison Blanche, a restaurant of whose distinctive charms, and exceptional wine list, I had heard nothing but praise.

Le Coq, as it is lovingly referred to by its many regular customers, is two minutes' walk from the Mairie de Saint Ouen metro in a northern suburb of Paris that has for long been known for its strong communist sympathies. It dates back to 1850, as the black and white photos on the walls evince, but since 1975 it has been the second home of its proprietor, Alain François. That year is significant because the start of François's career as a restaurateur coincided with that of the then young, but now highly respected Meursault wine maker Jean-François Coche-Dury, and their continued friendship has meant that Coche-Dury's highly sought after wines feature prominently on Le Coq's list at ridiculously low prices. While other restaurateurs and collectors scrabble for a bottle or two, François receives 600 bottles a year from his old friend.

Over the past 30 years, François's presence at Le Coq has made it into, in the words of another member of this small society, a 'bistro des bons vivants'. Le Coq occupies a large, sunny corner site, with numerous models of cockerels throughout the dining room and at the rear a large courtyard with tables and umbrellas. Its proximity to the Stade de France, two metro stops away, has made it a favourite for rugby fans in particular, with Le Coq hosting, in the words of the locals, the 'third half' of any match once the final whistle has been blown.

More specifically, every Wednesday Le Coq's kitchen prepares tête de veau, one of only about 15 restaurants left in Paris which still carry on this culinary tradition according to Rival. And, as I walked into the Le Coq, there was a calf's

head, resting on a carving trolley next to a side of the restaurant's own smoked salmon that was being carved for other customers in the restaurant. This particular tête de veau was a taster for those who had come to Rival's book signing prior to the dinner and was being offered alongside Coche-Dury's Bourgogne Aligoté 2002.

Rival was sitting at the end of a long table, cigar in hand, urging those who had come in for his book to tuck into their food while greeting the various members of his society as they sat down. Rival had already warned me that we would be eating later than he had indicated, something that invariably happens at French food and wine events. In the event he needed two attempts to seat us all. On the first occasion we all moved out to our table in the courtyard it became immediately obvious that too many had turned up for the proposed table and we had to return to the bar while two tables were put together.

When François finally sat down there were 18 members of this particular society round the table including Jean Claude Ribaut, the highly respected restaurant correspondent for Le Monde, and Blandine Vié who makes a speciality of writing about what the French call 'les abats' or offal. Rival rose, as befits the president, to make a brief speech and to introduce me as a new member of the society and then dinner got under way.

A first course was probably unnecessary but before the main event thick slices of delicious 'jambon persillé', the Burgundian cold terrine of ham studded with parsley, were placed before us. Then came the tête de veau, not served with the ceremony I had expected, perhaps because we were sitting so far from the kitchens but, as expected, served absolutely correctly. All the right parts of the animal were there, in generous proportions, and the sauce had all the appropriate acidity to cut through the gelatinous nature of the calf's head.

Rival pronounced his particular presidential grace, 'On attaque', and everybody started eating. Silence descended, only to be interrupted by various questions about the precise make-up of the sauce which Ribaut answered with the authority of someone who has obviously eaten this particular dish on more occasions than he can probably remember. A thick slice of an extremely sweet 'glace malakoff' was testimony, as though any were needed, to the appetites of those round the table.

At 10.30pm Rival rose to thank François and his chef and then to express his wish that the society's next meeting should take place in London. This dish has, he explained, a long, symbolic association with republicanism, with the calf's head taking the place of that of the king. Rival then began to wax lyrical about French republicans coming to the rescue of their long-suffering English compatriots.

But don't worry if you spot a table of Frenchmen and women wearing wigs and culottes, as Rival said they would, in London next January. They'll be only there to sample one London restaurant's tête de veau.

Le Coq de la Maison Blanche, 37 boulevard Jean Jaures, 93400 Paris,
01.40.11.01.23 www.coqdelamaisonbl.com. Closed Sunday except during the forthcoming Rugby World Cup in September.