How to make t□te de veau

14 Jun 2007 by Nick Lander/FT

Tête de veau, or calf's head, is definitely one of those dishes best left to a well-trained kitchen brigade that can cope with a dish that can take between four to seven hours to prepare correctly. This approach also puts the onus on the restaurant to carry out what has today become the hardest part of the recipe which is to first locate your calf's head.

Even around the table at Le Coq de la Maison Blanche there was animated discussion about how it was becoming increasingly difficult to find calves' heads for sale even at Rungis, the vast Paris food market which supplies so much top quality produce to Europe's restaurants.

In London 'tête de veau' has, however, appeared on the menu of Racine in Knightsbridge since it opened five years ago and as a result, Henry Harris, its affable chef/proprietor, has become the font of all wisdom for all those who want to eat it or know more about how it is cooked.

Harris buys his heads from Mark Beaujau at the Personal Catering Company although, as he was even prepared to confess, by then professional butchers have done much of the hardest work removing the skin, hair and fat from the head. Any trace of the latter leaves the finished dish tasting 'revolting', to quote Harris.

The butchers will have cut the head in two and then rolled it round a calf's tongue which once secured in a net Harris will poach in a broth, well seasoned with vegetables, parsley, peppercorns and plenty of salt either on the stove on the gentlest of flames or in the oven on the lowest light. Once a meat skewer can be put through the head and meets no resistance, on average after about five hours, it will be ready but at this stage Harris offers two invaluable bits of advice for the adventurous cook. "Firstly, this is one dish that has to be cooked completely. There is no more certain way of putting anyone off tête de veau forever than to serve it undercooked. And the second is that once you have finished cooking it you must allow it to cool completely otherwise it will explode."

Once cool, the meat is sliced into thick pieces and then warmed in the broth as it is ordered, and served, to meet Harris's personal taste, with a piece of calf's brain on top and a mustardy 'sauce ravigote'. One head will yield eight to ten portions and in the winter Harris can prepare two heads in a week for customers who fall, Harris explained, into two distinct camps. "It is either ordered by those who grew up after the war, still remember rationing and know that it is wrong to waste anything, or a much younger group of chefs and restaurateurs who feel somewhat obligated to order a dish that is not on anyone else's menu." For them, and any new adventurous diners that come through his door, Harris happily intends to keep this culinary tradition alive.

Racine, 239 Brompton Road, London SW3, 020-7584 4477.