C□te - the beginning of something big?

26 Sep 2007 by Nick Lander/FT

For the past two months I have been trying to track the recent opening of Côte bistro in Wimbledon, south east London, but without much success. There was not the usual press release to follow up and the internet revealed only that Côte was looking for kitchen porters at an hourly rate of £5.50.

The news of Côte's opening principally intrigued me because two of its four directors are Andy Bassadone, formerly MD of Caprice Holdings (The Ivy, Le Caprice and J Sheekey), and Chris Benians, one of his chefs. In 1999 they cleverly created Strada, a chic, mid priced Italian restaurant specialising in wood-fired pizza and pasta. The company ended up with 26 outlets before being sold in 2004 to businessman Richard Caring for £56 million. Encouraged by Caring to build the company's infrastructure and above all, as Bassadone explained, to invest in 'good food people', they opened another 20 branches around the UK before the company was sold earlier this year for £140 million.

They had already laid most of the plans for Côte, which is intended to do for French food and wine at the mid-priced level exactly what Strada did so successfully for Italy, when the company was sold and Bassadone explained the rationale for his new business as follows. "Firstly, I know to my cost from travelling around the UK looking at potential sites for Strada that there is still enormous scope for good restaurants in this mid price range because, as a result of a lack of competition and choice, it is invariably more expensive to eat well outside London than in London. Also, we want to create somewhere that our customers can rely on when they come home in the evening and find that there is nothing to eat in the fridge. We want Côte to be a better French restaurant than anything else in its price category and to surprise everyone with its quality."

Certainly my meal, when I eventually tracked down the first branch a 15 minute walk from the All England Tennis Club, revealed that yet again Bassadone and Benians have done their homework. The anchovy pissaladière, the warm flatbread from Nice, was crisp and pungent; the duck, chicken and pork liver terrine was full of flavour and the celeriac remoulade with the Bayonne ham was absolutely correct. Each is under £5. Grilled free-range chicken from the Landes in south west France features prominently and justifiably at £9.95 with homemade frites; the grilled lamb chops with Roquefort butter (£12.95) were succulent and only a dry hachis Parmentier, the French equivalent of cottage pie, disappointed. The desserts, some under £4, are excellent, as is the clean and unfussy presentation of all the food on white plates from an old mould that Benians discovered while visiting the Pillivuyt ceramic factory in France. When I expressed my pleasant surprise at these prices, Bassadone's response was that they would certainly be a couple of pounds more if they were merely to limit themselves to one restaurant but higher prices would rule out the planned expansion.

The authenticity of the food has been augmented by the simplicity of the design by Martin Brudnizki, who also designed Strada and, somewhat more expensively, Scott's in Mayfair. The entrance is warm and friendly and fairly reminiscent of the south of France but the interior has picked up such obviously successful principles from French bistros as the low-level lighting and a circular waiters' station to create a sense of intimacy. There are no flowers on the table and no pictures or photos on the walls.

This has less to do with cost, Benians explained, than peoples' expectations of what a French restaurant will be. "At this stage we have to evaluate our customers' expectations and it would be quite easy for us to make it too sophisticated. There are no snails or foie gras on the menu, for example. Although the menu is entirely in English, when we opened we had written the menu headings in French but we realised that some people were having some difficulty with this so it is now all in English. The plants and the blinds in the front of the restaurant have been removed and there have been a

couple of significant changes to the menu. Sole meunière has been taken off because customers thought it contained too much butter and we have removed the anchovies from the tuna Niçoise (shame!) because nobody was ordering it. It is now one of our best sellers."

In opening Strada and Côte, Bassadone and Benians have drawn two contrasting conclusions about how the British eat out. The first is that we seem to be far more comfortable with Italian food than French, perhaps because of pronunciation or because over the past decade mid-priced French food has tended to disappoint, even in France, while the whole world seems to have fallen in love with pizza, pasta and olive oil.

Conversely, however, we apparently still feel much more comfortable with French wine names. Whereas wine sales at Strada revolved predominantly around bottles of Pinot Grigio, at Côte they have been far more wide ranging and in its first fortnight their Puligny-Montrachet at £45 was outselling their house white at £12.95. This unexpected sales mix is crucial, however, as the higher average spend at Côte (currently £25 at dinner and £16 at lunch) will compensate somewhat for the fact that its menu is more labour intensive.

But these differences aside, the principles which made Strada successful will merely be applied more efficiently. A water filtration system has already been installed so that Côte can continue the popular practice of dispensing water free of charge. Rather than a children's menu or the supply of drawing pads and crayons, which Benians believes inevitably shifts responsibility for the children's behaviour from the parents to the restaurant, children will be offered a half portion of any of the main courses. Judging by Côte's appeal - the 88-seater restaurant served 300 customers on its busiest day to date - there is the potential to open in the mornings, too, once the lunch and dinner menus have been fine tuned.

Despite its obvious popularity, however, Bassadone remains sanguine about their prospects of expansion. "The biggest hurdle we face now," he explained, "is not maintaining standards but trying to convince British landlords and property developers that our covenant is good enough even with our considerable financial backing. From my experience they just don't seem to want to take any kind of a risk with independent restaurateurs."

That would be a shame because Côte has a lot to offer.

Côte, 8 High Street, Wimbledon Village, London SW19 5DX.

020-8947 7100. Open 7 days 12.00-23.00.