After Le Gavroche and Aubergine - Ang□lus

5 Oct 2007 by Nick Lander/FT

Thierry Tomasin left his home town of Beaumont de Lomagne near Toulouse in south west France, famous for its garlic and rugby, at the age of 22 in 1991 and has since played two very distinct roles in London's restaurants.

More visibly, he was Head Sommelier at Le Gavroche in Mayfair for 12 years before moving on to be General Manager of Aubergine in Chelsea until late last year. Simultaneously, as Chairman of the 100-strong Association of Sommeliers, he organised for its members occasional trips to wine-producing regions around the world and every other Saturday morning two-hour tasting sessions to which leading winemakers flew in to present their wares, to talk about how the wines were made and, most importantly, to provide interesting background information on their work in the vineyards and cellars. This educational role significantly improved the sommeliers' knowledge, and therefore, he hoped, their customers' enjoyment. This experience left Tomasin with a distinct impression of what he and his colleagues are there to offer.

"I always tell my team," Tomasin explained with the firm conviction that seems to be the birthright of most Frenchmen when they talk about food and wine, "that we are not simply waiters. We are salesmen of pleasure."

While learning from others - and Tomasin describes Silvano Giraldin, Le Gavroche's genial MD, as 'his second father' - he dreamt about opening a restaurant of his own. Last December he decided to turn this dream into reality but after six months of unmitigated frustration he was on the point of taking himself and his family back to France.

"Initially, I focused on Knightsbridge and Mayfair but the premiums that were being asked for the sites I liked were well beyond my means. In the end I had looked at 27 different sites and I was getting really fed-up when one day I was just searching around on the internet and I saw this place. It was a pub called The Archery Tavern and it had been closed for 18 months. I have been very lucky,"

Tomasins's Angelus restaurant, the result of £700,000 that he has spent over the past three months, is much more than the run of the mill conversion of a former pub.

The building itself is almost 200 years old and was constructed at a time when Bayswater was being created as a space for archery (hence the pub's name) with Hyde Park's still working stables (www.hydeparkstables.com) right behind. It is in an area of London not best served for restaurants of note despite the fact that it is in the heart of a smart residential area (the Blairs live close by), in the shadow of the Royal Lancaster Hotel and conveniently round the corner from Lancaster Gate tube. Most appealingly, the layout of the former pub with the bar right in the middle of the ground floor has forced Tomasin to think astutely about what would create the most appropriate and effective uses for the different areas.

While the outside area is still the place for an informal drink, the area closest to the stairs leading down to the kitchen has become the restaurant with 15 tables laid up with crisp white linen and Riedel glasses. Behind the bar is now a chic lounge area for which there is an extensive but lighter menu and downstairs are two further eating areas: a table for six to one side of the kitchen range and a private dining room for 22 that looks on to the glass panelled wine cellar.

Although Angelus comprises these several different rooms, its interior has sensitively been given an early 20th century look by a Belgian and French couple working for Gong, a design company with no previous restaurant experience which suits the professional change of direction Tomasin has decided to take. “I have served my time in Michelin starred restaurants and I want this place to be more relaxed, the kind of place people can just drop in to for one dish and a glass of wine", he enthused. But a change of direction does not mean a drop in standards and the glasses are just as polished, the linen just as sharp and the waiters' uniforms just as crisp as in his previous restaurants.

Despite all his experience and ambition, however, Tomasin realises that a great deal of Angelus’s success will depend on the choice of his chef, an area in which he had until this summer very little experience. But a trip to Paris led to interviews with three different chefs and an immediate meeting of minds with Oliver Duret, then working at Hôtel Scribe. It was a risk on both sides. Duret speaks little English and has never worked in England before while Tomasin was putting his faith, and his new business, in the hands of someone he hardly knew - although he has gone out of his way to make life as pleasant as possible in the basement kitchen by installing two large windows to give invaluable natural light as well as an expensive Chavet oven range.

Perhaps it is Duret’s lack of exposure to London’s current menus that has allowed him to come up with his own in which the dishes are fresh, clean and uncluttered. The Cornish crab in aspic with a fennel cream, served in a clear glass, was a lovely combination as was the much richer foie gras crème brûlée and the grilled sardines with a terrine of goats’ cheese and tapenade. I ate the rabbit, foie gras and vintage port pie with a mesclun salad on my first visit and it was so good I would have ordered it again on my second but I happily chose the fillets of John Dory with lemon thyme and artichokes instead. Other interesting pairings include lamb with a Moroccan spice crust; beef with a Comté cheese pancake; figs with gingerbread and cinnamon ice cream and a chocolate and praline cocktail served in a Martini glass.

Angelus also gives Tomasin the opportunity to enthuse as warmly about his food as the wines he is offering. Although his list is not the finished article – he has, he told me, another 75 bins to include – it is catholic in range, gentle in its mark-ups and customer friendly in what is available by the glass.

Life as a restaurateur has already brought changes, Tomasin explained. “I am only sleeping three hours a night, I don’t have much time for my family and there are no days off. But I love it.” If he can find others to share his passion and to support Duret’s obvious talents then Angelus should become his new home for many years to come.

Angelus, 4 Bathurst Street, London W2 2SD. www.angelusrestaurant.co.uk 020-7402 0083.

Open 12.00-23.00 Tuesday-Saturday. £33 for three courses plus wine and service.