

The old, the new and the too new in Paris

21 Feb 2008 by Nick Lander/FT

French and British restaurants have already suffered two body-blows this year, even before any significant fall-out from a faltering global economy.

The first was the death of Jean-Claude Vrinat of **Taillevent** restaurant in Paris and it was followed a few weeks later by that of Bill Baker of Reid Wines, at the age of only 53.

Baker, who combined unparalleled knowledge of both food and wine with a staggering appetite (he was 23 stone and required 10 pallbearers to carry his coffin in and out of Wells Cathedral) was responsible for writing many of the UK's best wine lists. His legacy can still be enjoyed at the numerous D&D restaurants he consulted for in London (www.dandresaturants.com) or when eating at Monachyle Mhor or Boath House in Scotland or Gravetye Manor in Sussex.

Although food and hospitality are every restaurateur's main preoccupation, wine sales provide the most accurate barometer of the business. When the economy is strong and private and corporate credit cards are flexible, wine can not only generate significant profits but also the necessary cash-flow that will allow the restaurateur to re-invest in his cellar and his dining room.

When times get tough, wine sales are the first to suffer, as Taillevent's young Burgundian sommelier recently reported. "Business is still good," he explained as he poured a 2005 Vouvray Sec from Domaine Huet he had cleverly chosen as an aperitif and for our first course, "but we have been affected by the banking crises, first in the US and now here. We are quieter at the beginning of the week and I hear exactly the same from the sommeliers in the city's other top restaurants when we meet at wine tastings."

On the recent Friday night we visited, Taillevent was packed and justifiably so. The business, which includes the nearby L'Angle du Faubourg restaurant in Paris, one in Tokyo and the wine business, Les Caves de Taillevent, is now run by Jean-Claude's capable daughter Valérie, who has chosen to leave the restaurant to the team her father trained, most conspicuously maître d' Jean-Marie Ancher, who has worked here for the past 34 years. In fact, if anything, the waiting staff seemed as effective as ever and possibly more composed and relaxed than when Vrinat would hover anxiously over them.

The kitchen under Alain Solivérès produced some delicious and finely judged food. There are only two types of bread, white and brown, but there is no need for more variety when each is so good. A thin tart dotted with eight frogs legs and a garlic mousse provided a colourful display, as did the array of new season's turnips surrounding three rolled fillets from the breast of a duck from the Dombes, while a blood orange sauce supplied precisely the right acidic balance to a pastilla of pigeon. Innovative as these dishes may be, traditionalists have no grounds for concern either.

The food at **Le Comptoir du Relais Saint-Germain** on the Left Bank offers the same reassurance, albeit in much less comfort but at a fraction of the price. Our excellent lunch for four with two bottles of wine - a lively Happy Hours Jurançon Sec 2006 and a G. Descombes Brouilly 2005 - came to 200 euros, which seemed a bargain considering the quality of the

food, and ended with a major revelation.

Le Comptoir is owned by Yves Cambdeborde, the chef who had made such a success of his bistro La Regalade a decade ago. But when Madame decided that she preferred the role of hotelier to maîtresse d', he obliged by buying the **Relais Saint-Germain** hotel (whose restaurant is only open in the evening and extremely difficult to reserve in, I am told) and converted what was the Bar Monaco next door into this remarkably good, if remarkably tiny, bistro.

Le Comptoir opens from midday to 6pm every day and takes no reservations. But its excellent value for money and great location at l'Odeon in the 6th have managed to disprove the long held view that Parisians will only lunch between noon and two o'clock. When we arrived at 2.15pm the place was packed and there was a queue of a dozen waiting on the pavement, all under the beady eye of one woman who acts as manager of the queue, seater and greeter, order-taker, waitress as well as credit card processor. Someone best not to be crossed, I would guess.

When we finally sat down it was to an exceptionally long menu whose brevity of description of each dish only seemed to add to our anticipated pleasure. And certainly 12 dishes later nothing had disappointed.

The oeufs mayonnaise, a dish so simple that it is perhaps the most accurate test of any bistro, were first class, the yolks and mayonnaise a deep yellow. So, too, were a much more intricate terrine of foie gras and pear and a creamy chestnut soup with more foie gras. A boudin blanc with creamy mashed potato; a thick slice of onglet, hanger steak and two slowly cooked lamb dishes were equally good and it was an unexpected pleasure to have them all served with different, well-cooked vegetables. The rum baba is full of Armagnac and the ice creams, particularly the caramel sea salt and the chocolate enlivened with Espelette peppers, were exceptional.

Inside, Le Comptoir seats about 36 but expect to be jostled, while the tables outside can take a further 16 even in winter when they bring down the awning, turn up the heaters and provide every customer with a blanket.

The revelation came right at the end of our meal. I had noticed that all the dishes were carried up a winding staircase from the basement by someone who was definitely non-French (and who told me that he made the trip up and down about 100 times a day). When I followed him down to the lavatories I noticed that there was a window into the kitchen, to which I promptly gravitated. There was not a Frenchman there, either. Only two very busy chefs, Tamil by origin I would guess, and a kitchen porter of the same nationality. As my Parisian restaurateur friend whom we were lunching with commented on the news, "It's amazing what you can do when you buy well and then train your staff as precisely as Cambdeborde does. After that anybody can do it."

Another bistro, this time in the 11th, and a quick coffee on the way home left two other lasting impressions. The long-established **Le Chateaubriand** has now been taken over by Basque chef Inaki Aizpitarte and its interior has a definite air of Moro, London's long established Spanish restaurant in Clerkenwell about it, although Le Chateaubriand is not quite as noisy. While this bar similarly serves tapas to great demand, the restaurant offers a no-choice five course set menu for 40 euros, which seems to be even more popular than the bar. I was not totally convinced by the food, a case of one ingredient too many in each dish in my opinion, but Le Chateaubriand with its dried seaweed and dramatic sculptures on the plate at least demonstrates a desire to embrace the new among younger Parisians.

Finally, to the café at which I insisted on stopping because of the T shirt the staff were wearing: '*J'arrive toute de suite*' or 'I will be with you immediately' was clearly printed on the back of each - the very thing every customer wants to hear.

Le Comptoir du Relais Saint-Germain, 5, carrefour de l'Odeon, 75006 Paris. .

Relais Saint-Germain, www.hotel-paris-relais-saint-germain.com

Le Chateaubriand, 129 Avenue Parmentier, 11th, 01.43.57.45.95

Taillevent, www.taillevent.com