Shooting the breeze in New York

30 May 2008 by Nick Lander/FT

I walked in the early evening sunshine from my hotel, The Alex on E45th street, down 1st Avenue to 7th street, where the Lower East Side meets the East Village in Manhattan, confident of some good food and some equally good restaurant gossip.

I had been reliably informed that this is a burgeoning restaurant area, one that attracts a young and discerning crowd but one that is best visited at night. “The shutters around there don’t go up until 2 or 3pm,” the novelist Jay McInerney told me. And certainly as I waited for Akiko Katayama I couldn’t help noticing a plethora of restaurants getting ready for their first customers of the night, restaurants whose menus range from Korea to Poland and Peru with offers of organic cocktails at one place and Japanese crêpes at another.

The Japanese-born Katayama would have been worth waiting for even if the surroundings had not been as conducive as the interior of the **Bar Solex**. She has lived in New York for the past twelve years and during that time, despite the fact that her thin waist seems to be in inverse proportion to her voracious appetite, has built up a formidable reputation writing about the city’s food and restaurants for various magazines in Japan, advising the Japanese government and appearing as a judge on the US version of the cookery competition Iron Chef. Because of these connections, Katayama has won the confidence of many of New York’s chefs and restaurateurs.

We had chanced upon Bar Solex because even from the doorstep it looks extremely elegant but once I recognised the man sitting at the far end of the bar typing furiously on his Apple computer I realised that we would be in the best of hands. I last saw Christophe Chatron-Michaud in London in the mid 1990s when he was opening Vong in The Berkeley Hotel, since when he has gone on to open numerous restaurants for others. Now he and his partner, Lissan The, who run F&B Concept Development, have opened a string of bars in this area, including three Bar Veloces, which concentrate on Italy, Bar Carrera, which focuses on Spain, and now Bar Solex to highlight France.

“We have tried to convey the spirit of the TGV, Train Grand Vitesse,” Chatron-Michaud explained, when I complimented him on its relaxed and relaxing interior, “and I think we’ve been fortunate in working with a design company called Opus X. But what I’m most pleased about is that we’re attracting a lot of chefs and restaurant people who come in here late at night when they’ve closed.” I would have happily stayed here much longer but Katayama said we must move on if we wanted to get a seat at **Momofuku**, the extremely popular noodle bar, three blocks away.

She was quite right because what chef David Chang has created here is a fascinating noodle bar whose high-quality, inexpensive food is guaranteed to please everyone. As Mario Batali, the hugely popular Italian chef, commented over a coffee the next day, the appeal of this place is that its food and approach are ‘no-brow’ as he put it - neither low, middle nor high brow but simply designed to attract and satisfy anyone with a healthy appetite. An approach which, we agreed, put it on an equal footing with another of our mutual favourites, **Pearl** Oyster Bar on Cornelia Street in the West Village, which serves New England seafood and our particular favourite, a lobster roll with shoestring potatoes.

The ground floors in this area appear to be particularly deep but not that high and Momofuku’s interior makes best use of this via a run of two large counters to eat at, one in front of the bar at the front, the other in front of a large, open kitchen at the rear with some additional tables to one side. Neither of us could pass up the opportunity to watch chefs at work and fortunately two seats right opposite the kitchen soon became available (Momofuku does not take reservations). As we did so one significant difference became immediately obvious between here and a similar set up in Asia – to allow for the much broader and bulkier chefs the gap between the counter and the cooking range on the far wall is far wider than it would be in Japan, for example.

A glass of the house sake to hand, Katayama picked up the slight, A5 shaped menu, and pointed out certain of the dishes

that came as something of a surprise for me. Among the first courses were cured Arctic char with rye flatbread; a grilled octopus salad with pickled chilli; fried veal sweetbreads with sweet chilli sauce and veal sweetbreads with salted cucumbers. Having ordered some steamed pork buns and grilled beef tongue with mustard and charred onions, Katayama explained, “Chang was very clever in introducing these kind of dishes, which you wouldn’t normally expect to see in a noodle restaurant, because it immediately brought this place to the attraction of the real foodie enthusiasts in the city who are always looking for something new to write about. And he has now pulled off the same publicity coup with Ko (which means small or a child in Japanese), the tiny restaurant he has just opened very close to here and only takes reservations via the internet. So every morning people are desperately trying to log-in to see whether they can book a seat for the coming week.”

Publicity aside, Chang has also laid down some very high standards for his noodle dishes, a style of cooking whose integrity can be easily affected by the quality, or not, of the broth and the proportion of the broth to the other ingredients in the dish. Whatever these are, whether pork, chicken, shrimp or vegetable, they can very quickly lose their flavour if they wallow for too long at the bottom of a bowl of insipid broth.

Chang and his team eschew these shortcuts, listing the farmers who supply their pork and bacon and George Kao as his noodle producer, and then cook up large bowls of food which are only two thirds full of the broth, whose robustness then only enhances the flavours of the main ingredients.

This professionalism behind the kitchen counter was enhanced by a brief interruption, as we finished slurping our noodles, from Ami Lourie, who introduced himself as the restaurant’s new General Manager. Having recognised Katayama from a previous restaurant at which he had served her, he wanted us to try a small glass of Iqhilika. “This is mead, a drink fermented from honey,” he explained. “It’s made in South Africa and I think goes really well with the sweetness of the pork in dishes like the steamed buns and some of our noodle dishes. One of my responsibilities here now is to raise the quality of our drinks programme to match that of our food.”

I paid our bill of US$65 for dinner for two and asked Katayama where we were heading next. “I’m going to take you to my favourite bar round here, **The Pegu Club** on West Houston Street. Now it’s my turn to hear what’s going on in London’s restaurants – I think it’s the least I deserve.”

The Alex, www.thealexhotel.com

Solex, www.solexnyc.com

Pearl, www.pearloysterbar.com

Momofuku, www.momofuku.com

Pegu Club, www.peguclub.com