Eating in Alsace

12 Sep 2008 by Nick Lander/FT

Colmar in landlocked Alsace in the east of France seemed the ideal location to put to rest one of the longest running myths in the restaurant world: that one should avoid ordering fish in a restaurant on a Monday because it is unlikely to be fresh.

While this may once have been true when the supply was still controlled by the large fish markets, this situation has now significantly changed for the better as a growing number of chefs choose to buy from smaller, independent suppliers who liaise directly with the fishermen.

The phrase 'day boat', which now often precedes many descriptions of a menu's fish dishes, reveals this close connection between the kitchen and those who have braved the seas in small boats and who are more likely to have done so when the weather is clement rather than because of the day of the week. Improved refrigeration, mobile phones and speedier transport have also been important contributory factors.

The juxtaposition of the old and the new faces of fish supply and cooking could not have been more obvious as we walked one recent Monday evening through the wonderfully preserved timber-framed houses in Colmar's medieval heart and suddenly emerged by a canal which our French host described as '*notre Petite Venise*.' Still named Rue de la Poissonerie, it was here (the foreground to JY's, pictured) that Alsatian fishmongers plied their trade for many years.

Straight ahead is a brightly-lit 17th century building with the region's characteristic sloping rooves but a modern trompe-l'oeil façade which has been the home since his return from New York six years ago to chef Jean-Yves Schillinger and his wife, Kathia.

JY's, as it is widely called, is the very antithesis of a typical Alsatian brasserie or winstub and this certainly seems to cause some discussion amongst those who live there. It is unlike anywhere else in the city.

Its interior is modern, light but extremely comfortable with, most obviously, an open kitchen diagonally opposite the front door which allows Schillinger the luxury of cooking while saying hello to his customers as they arrive and then bidding them farewell.

This style was maintained by the menu which struck me as unusual for two different reasons. The first was the use of a layout most frequently seen in the US and, I believe, very user-friendly, of writing the main ingredient in bold followed by the secondary ingredients in smaller print underneath. The enticing fish category included cod, salmon, John Dory, monkfish and the increasingly popular pollack.

The second was that while this region happily shows no regard for reducing its appetite for foie gras, here it was not the most obvious ingredient as it is so frequently elsewhere in Alsace. Rather, it is mentioned just once towards the bottom of the first courses as the only one that is neither fish nor vegetarian.

The three fish first courses we ordered were as fresh as they were exciting. A tall glass filled with crabmeat, topped with guacamole and a cactus sorbet; a warm salad of lobster and chickpeas; and, to test the freshness of the fish fully, sea bass, salmon and tuna maki and sashimi, which was excellent. Most visually exciting of all, however, was the delivery of a tall, six armed stand carrying different, substantial 'tapas' on each plate.

These skills were carried through into the main courses. Bright green sprigs of wild asparagus were thrust into slices of a fresh monkfish tail alongside enoki mushrooms with a potato puree whose wasabi flavour could have been stronger while the plump John Dory fillet was coated with a rocket emulsion and sat alongside a tranche of pungent, diced vegetables enhanced with ginger and turmeric.

It was only at the end of the meal that I learnt that JY's will now close on Mondays, a day on which it is becoming increasingly more difficult to enjoy France's better restaurants. This is partly connected, however, to the fact that Schillinger will open a brasserie, Cote Four, in the centre of Colmar in early November, complete with bakery.

But the tradition of serving fresh fish on Mondays will continue about a dozen kilometres from the centre of Colmar in the village of Ammerschwihr on the Route des Vins at the long established **Aux Armes de France**, now in the very capable hands of Philippe Gaertner.

Both Schillinger and Gaertner are the sons of renowned Alsace chefs. But while the former has pursued an ultra-modern approach the latter has chosen not to change too much about the layout of his menu or his first floor dining room. Instead, by deciding to hand back the Michelin star which the restaurant had held since the 1930's to concentrate on delivering excellent value for money and by now only closing the restaurant on Wednesdays, Gaertner seems to have adopted the right approach to making his restaurant successful in today's market - even if the bedrooms could do with a makeover.

The history of this restaurant is vividly evoked by the photos on the staircase, the colourful paintings and its menu which still lists several of the dishes that have been long time favourites. These include a salad of lobster and foie gras in homage to Fernand Point who taught so many of the great French chefs, fillets of sole with noodles, and their own interpretation of a gratin of lobster.

But as this was a Monday lunchtime there was a special 27 euro menu that offered fresh fish and, it transpired, great value. After an amuse-bouche of tomatoes and artichokes came a light meat terrine with pumpkin seeds and a well-dressed salad and then a fillet of pike, a freshwater fish far more widely appreciated in Europe than the UK. Pike needs something vibrant to accentuate its flavours and here it was colourfully accompanied by a bright yellow sauce colombo, a mixture of spices from the French West Indies, squid ink linguine alongside three pale, crisp squid rings. Dessert was also one of their classics, a gratin of red fruits topped with a sorbet made from the region's sparkling wine.

Aux Armes de France left two other strong impressions. The first is that while its wine list offers an array of Alsace wines there are also lurking towards the end of the sections from other French regions several excellent, mature and seriously under-priced bottles, particularly from Bordeaux and Burgundy.

The second was quite how wide an age group a restaurant such as this, steeped in the tradition of hospitality, can satisfy. At the table of six next to me were two boys aged eight and six who after their main course of beef and pasta sat down on the floor and played cards. Opposite them was a grey haired couple at least 75 years older who smiled with huge anticipation as another of this restaurant's signature dishes, a whole chicken roasted with vinegar for two, was presented to them and then most professionally carved. They finished it off with great gusto and only British reserve stopped me from applauding.

Restaurant JY's, 17 Rue de la Poissonerie, 68000 Colmar: tel: 03.89.215.360, www.jean-yves-schillinger.com

Closed Sunday and Monday.

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