

Agapé in Paris's 17th

27 Sep 2008 by Nick Lander/Business Life

As we left Agapé, which opened earlier this year in Paris's chic 17th arrondissement, I congratulated Laurent Lapaire, its maitre d' and co-owner, on what had been an excellent dinner. As I wished him good luck, he replied, "Thank you, we will need it for the long-term".

'The long term' has a particular resonance in the restaurant business. If a restaurant can survive three years then most believe it has passed a significant landmark and will only continue to prosper. Those that manage to celebrate their 10th birthday are few and far between while those passing 20 or 30 years are rare animals indeed.

On the basis of what we ate, drank and observed, Agapé certainly has the potential for the long term. Lapaire has spent the last 10 years at Alain Passard's highly rated Arpège restaurant where he learnt many of his obvious professional skills (which included managing to catch four menus before they hit the floor as they slipped out of his hands in the middle of the restaurant) as well as establishing a loyal following of customers who will, he hopes, follow him from the seventh arrondissement to his new home.

And it was at Arpège that Lapaire made the most useful contact any restaurateur can hope to make, meeting his chef, Bertrand Grebaut. They seem to share the same physical characteristics in that both are tall, spare and highly energetic, attributes that will be important now that the reputation of the restaurant rests on their shoulders.

This is not an easy time to open a restaurant so obviously focused on quality, but Lapaire and Grebaut seem to have laid solid foundations for the future.

One obvious way in which they have achieved this is by not spending too much money on the décor although the tableware is impressive. The room is comfortable, but their investment has obviously been spent on what excites them and will bring in the customers – the food and wine.

Grebaut's approach to his menu is one that has been common in Italy, increasingly so in the US, Britain and Spain and is finally taking hold in France: it is short, seasonal and pays due credit to the growers and farmers he buys from. As well as a €39 euro lunch menu and two tasting menus (at €77 and €110), the menu comprises four starters, four main courses and four desserts plus some daily specials which Lapaire described to us with enthusiasm even if, disappointingly, without mentioning their prices.

This determined focus produces some excellent food. We began with a small complimentary bowl of a rich lobster bisque, followed by a creamy, intense fennel soup and what appeared to be the most popular starter, a carpaccio of veal with a citrus dressing. This combination of rather rich meat and an enhancing, sharp dressing continued in an excellent main course of pigeon with caramelised endive and a blood orange dressing. A fillet of turbot with wild mushrooms was excellent and would have looked even better without its unnecessary foam.

What is exciting about watching Lapaire at work in his own restaurant is not just his genial manner and his passion for wine, but also how he has chosen to express this.

On the shelves between the banquettes and walls is a series of about two dozen modern decanters [Riedel, one illustrated – JR] in such unusual shapes and sizes, both clear and dark glass, that they could initially be mistaken for a collection of vases. Some are so tall that they reminded me of yards of ale; some resemble the ram's horn blown in synagogues at the Jewish New Year; while a third looks just like a teapot but without a lid, used specifically for young wines.

Lapaire has great fun selecting the right decanter from behind where his customers are sitting, decanting the wines and explaining its charms. This approach, alongside Grebaut's culinary skills, should with any luck keep Agapé in business for many years to come.

Agapé 51 rue Jouffroy-d'Abbans, 75017 Paris +33 1 42 27 20 18 Closed Saturday and Sunday.

