Best in class 2008

16 Dec 2008 by Nick Lander/FT

I have been staring somewhat forlornly at the box that contains most of the menus from the restaurants I have had the good fortune to eat in over the past year.

This is not just because they evoke the dishes, wine and conversation which I have had the good fortune to enjoy, of course, but the growing realisation that with the recent, abrupt fall in the value of the pound, 2008 may well prove to be the last year of eating out inexpensively for some time to come.

The pound's 30% depreciation against the dollar makes restaurants in the US less attractive, while its 20% fall in value against the euro has had a similar effect on eating out in Europe. The prices of imported ingredients on British menus, as well as wine most obviously, will also be affected. But that is for next year.

Before turning, however, to the best of these meals, it is particularly encouraging to report on two exciting, keenly-priced restaurants that have recently opened in London's West End.

The first, which must also earn any award for the easiest name to misspell, is **Bocca di Lupo** (pictured), Italian for 'mouth of the wolf', close to Shaftesbury Avenue and therefore particularly convenient for pre- and post-theatre or cinema.

This former casino has now been taken over by chef Jacob Kenedy and general manager Victor Hugo and cleverly reworked into a restaurant with a long counter opposite an open kitchen with tables beyond. But it is Kenedy's menu that excites me, not just for his cooking style as for the presentation of his dishes. While he credits the various regions of Italy with the food that he has come to enjoy during his travels there, he also has had the perspicacity to offer all these in both small and large servings. A lunch of small but generous servings of fried prawns, squid and soft-shell crab; whole fried artichokes and veal sweetbreads; and a dish of crescentini that combined bread with fennel, speck and cheese took me to Venice, Rome and Bologna and, with a Sicilian burnt almond granita topped with a bitter chocolate sorbet, ultimately to a bill of £36 for two.

Terroirs has just emerged on the former site of a Davy's Wine Bar to bring a thoroughly Gallic feel to William IV Street that runs between the Strand and Trafalgar Square. Its charms are not just an extensive wine list (its owners are Les Caves de Pyrène, a respected wine wholesaler) but also its ambition to offer the best artisan food and wine producers from Britain, France, Italy and Spain.

This is achieved via a paper placemat that doubles as a menu and which, under headings entitled charcuterie, cheese, small plates and plats du jour, cleverly offers something authentic for any appetite and wallet at any time from midday to 11pm. From this I have enjoyed jambon persillé (£5); piperade Basquaise with a chorizo sausage (£8); a duck and salsify pie (£11); grilled red mullet with a basil beurre blanc (£10); and a hearty oxtail casserole with snails (£12).

What both Bocca di Lupo and **Terroirs** offer is not just distinctive food but also a style of eating that will give their customers far more flexibility in what they order and therefore ultimately in what they have to pay for. And, in the case of Terroirs particularly, there is an unforgettable sense of place. Its interior includes signs, pictures and even an armoire that can only be described as 'very French'. A meal here leaves very strong and happy memories.

The two very different places that also managed to leave the strongest memories for me during the year have been **El Bulli** in north-east Spain, about which I have written at length, and the **Sichuan Governmental Canteen** in Beijing. Our lunch for four at the latter, when we finally found the entrance, started with dessert (which the waitress said we had to order and then promptly delivered because, as she explained, 'it was ready'); several dishes incorporating lip tingling 'facing the heaven' chillis; and ended with a bill, including beers that proved absolutely vital, of £15.

The **Sichuan Governmental Canteen** is, however, the only one of my most memorable restaurants this year that does not quite share the one common denominator that seems to unite the others, and that is a sense of finesse. By this I don't mean any unnecessary plush or extravagant fittings but rather that the commensurate rise in cooking skills, wine selection and customer knowledge has produced a series of chefs and restaurateurs whose expertise and experience so obviously chooses to embrace that fundamental architectural principle of 'less is more'.

That is why I would rush back, in as environmentally friendly fashion as possible, to **El Celler de Can Roca** in Girona, also in north-east Spain. Here the three Roca brothers have created a menu, wine cellar and dining room that exude style but without one element seeming to outshine any other. Andrea Berton has managed to create a menu of similar standing to the red and white dining room created for him by the design house **Trussardi**, at a restaurant of the same name next to La Scala in Milan.

Close to home I am pleased that I can take public transport to enjoy **Quo Vadis**, which Sam and Eddie Hart resuscitated this year to such effect. Nor would I let the torrential rain which followed me all the way on the train from London to Abergavenny in Wales ever deter me from enjoying any dish which Shaun Hill had chosen for his menu, seemingly so effortlessly but obviously with so much thought at **The Walnut Tree Inn**. And I wish I could stay for some time on the far bank of the River Dart in Dartmouth, Devon, and take the small boat that Mitch Tonks lays on for his customers to and from dinner at his **Seahorse** restaurant.

San Francisco introduced me to the charms of Michael Tusk's cooking at **Quince**; reminded me of the perennial warmth which Judy Rodgers continues to breathe into her team at **Zuni Café**; and opened my eyes to the novel approach the owners of **A16** are taking by seeking to copyright their menu and creating 'Meatball Mondays' to stimulate business on the quietest day of the week.

Back in New York, I would choose to start any trip with Daniel Humm's cooking at **Eleven Madison Park** and revisit Brooklyn to see how many new, relaxed eating places have opened their doors. And if all I could then afford would be a daily bowl of noodles at **Momofuku**, then so be it.

Finally, if France seems short changed, then four great value places in Paris should redeem this seeming oversight. **Le Comptoi**r, close to L'Odeon; **Fish** and **Itinéraires,** both on the Left Bank; and the ever-hospitable Rodolphe Paquin at **Le Repaire de Cartouche** in the 11th. And I would definitely and happily head off for another meal at **Restaurant de la Gare** in Guewenheim, deep in the Alsace countryside, where the wine list is so exceptional that there would have to be a hotel close by either for the night or the afternoon.

There will, I hope, be just as many good tables in 2009 and they will almost certainly be easier to reserve. Annoyingly, however, anyone traveling from the UK will find them considerably more expensive.

Bocca di Lupo, www.boccadilupo.com

Terroirs, www.terroirswinebar.com