Romantic notions in the New Forest

12 Feb 2009 by Nick Lander/FT

Romance is an integral part of the restaurant world and not just something that obviously boosts sales on Valentine's Day.

It is a romantic vision which often inspires restaurateurs when they first walk around a building site and imagine what one day it could be. Romance also often provides the inspiration for chefs as they work with various ingredients to assemble one of their more memorable dishes.

Then there is the romantic bond that frequently attracts those who are working together in the kitchen or alongside one another in the dining room. This close physical proximity is accentuated by the anti-social hours many work as it is so much easier to spend time with someone else who has also just finished work at midnight or later.

But even I, who certainly allowed this romantic emotion to sway my decision to become a restaurateur and then watched numerous relationships develop amongst my staff, was surprised when Nina Basset told me how quickly she had moved in with her now husband, Gerard, after they had started working together. 'It was two weeks', she confessed, before adding with a smile, 'but his flat did have a washing machine in it even if he didn't quite know how to work it'.

That brief encounter was 20 years ago when Nina had just become the restaurant manager at Chewton Glen Hotel in the New Forest, Hampshire. Gerard was in the middle of establishing himself as one of the world's most respected sommeliers, winning all kinds of competitions except the title of Best Sommelier of the World award, in which he has come second three times.

The Bassets moved on to be part of the team which opened the Hotel du Vin group that counted on his expertise and memorabilia supplied by his contacts in the wine world to establish seven relaxed, mid-market hotels which were successfully sold in 2004. 'I made £2.5 million out of the sale', Basset explained, 'enough for us to feel comfortable with but not so much that we could ever think about not working again'.

The sale also provided a breathing space for Basset to consider the future in his adopted country that he had first fallen in love with in 1979 when he had come over to support his football team, St-Étienne. Subsequent trips involved less romantic stints such as washing up in a hotel on the Isle of Man and one very precarious moment when, failing to understand what was implied by the question 'Do you have any criminal convictions?' at a Job Centre interview, he had written down his answer as 'Too difficult to explain'. His innocence on all counts was ultimately accepted.

Hotels, good wine and food were by then firmly in the family, particularly as Nina had spent four years inspecting hotels for the AA Guide. This had the major disadvantage of her having to spend at least four nights each week away from her family but it ultimately provided invaluable insights into the smallest, vital details of what makes a bedroom comfortable, in her opinion, such as always putting a small jug of fresh milk into the mini bar rather than a plastic container of the long life variety.

For Gerard location was key to their next move. He was conscious of the loyal following his wine expertise had generated among customers at Chewton Glen at New Milton and then at the Hotel du Vin in Winchester. And as an adopted Englishman he did not want to give up his morning ritual of walking his dog (named after a grape variety, of course) on the beach. 'I knew we had to be close to Southampton, which is a 15-minute drive away, to be able to attract business people. They wouldn't stay overnight during the week if we were located too deep in the New Forest. Yet we had to be close to the forest to attract those who just wanted to get away from it all. Fortunately, we found an old hotel and £2.8 million later we opened TerraVina.'

The first thing that has to be said about TerraVina is that this Victorian building, from the outside at least, it is not that attractive. But its position, right across the road from the forest, where the ponies amble during the day and the deer zip across at night, could not be better. The display of rhododendrons in late April/early May is, I was assured, enchanting, while the interior and the bedrooms reflect Nina's professionalism and eye for detail.

But I had two specific questions for Basset. The first was to seek confirmation that he, as I was beginning to hear from

other small, independent hoteliers around the UK, was seeing a significant upturn in business as the weak pound made short trips to Europe increasingly expensive. I also wanted to know how he was adapting to his new role as a restaurateur with eleven bedrooms to fill.

To the first question, Basset responded positively. 'Yes, I do think we are beginning to see a definite change. Today, I took bookings for 13 different bedroom nights and that is the most we have taken on one day for some time. This is promising, especially as it is before the clocks change and the weather improves.'

How to achieve what both Bassets have in mind for their restaurant has, however, proved more challenging.

'I knew that we had to be completely different from the Hotel du Vin approach so on the wine we eschewed the memorabilia for a much brighter, contemporary approach. But from the beginning I have always wanted to serve the kind of food I first encountered when I was travelling around the vineyards of California, in Napa and Sonoma. I love the pizza that they make over there but I don't think we've ever really cracked it. I spent a lot of money on installing a pizza oven but at the moment we only use it for cooking the roast beef on a Sunday!'

In design terms the restaurant looks the part. The far wall has been opened up to house yet more wine; there is a large open kitchen that would not look out of place in San Francisco; and the interior, incorporating light wood and comfortable materials, is immediately relaxing. Best of all is a series of glass panelled doors on to the patio and garden which Basset hopes to open up far more often this summer than he did last.

Basset and his team have written menus and a wine list with immediate appeal. We ate a crab and leek lasagne; a pickled artichoke salad with enoki mushrooms; local venison, the loin roast and the shoulder braised ; and an excellent crème brulée (a recipe, it was whispered to me, they had borrowed from a customer!); all of which were very good. And the extremely catholic and well-priced wine list, predominantly in the care of two young sommeliers, Laura and Laurent. who exude enthusiasm, is first class.

Yet I could not help leaving with the conviction that Basset is still striving to achieve precisely the food he would like his restaurant to serve. No-one could fault his work ethic. The only person in the world to be a Master Sommelier, Master of Wine and hold a Wine MBA from Bordeaux University (where his thesis was on wine lists), he still yearns for that big title. 'The Best Sommelier competition is going to be held next in Chile in 2010', he explained, 'and I may well give it one last go'.

Hotel TerraVina, www.hotelterravina.co.uk