Hearty eating in Paris' 11th

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Le Repaire du Cartouche in Paris's 11th arrondissement is one of the most unusual restaurants I have ever visited.

Firstly, it is impossible to miss. Exit the metro station St-Sébastien-Froissart just south of République and the restaurant is directly in front of you (as you can see from this cruelly cropped but excellent photograph by French photographer Bertrand Celce, whose blog www.wineterroirs.com is worth a visit).

Secondly, few restaurants have been named after brigands, but Louis Dominique Cartouche was one such in the early 18th century before being betrayed by a lieutenant and meeting a grisly end. Repaire is French for cartridge and the menu has a drawing of Cartouche armed with two pistols on its inside cover.

Then, perhaps less unusual but definitely much more comforting, is the fact the menu and wine list will probably be handed to you by a gentle giant of a fellow wearing a white chef's jacket. He is Rodolphe Paquin, 6'2", with grey hair and a ruddy face that gets ruddier as the evening progresses. But to describe Paquin as a mere chef/proprietor is somewhat of an understatement.

Paquin underwent a classical culinary training at the Hôtel Crillon but was part of a vanguard of chefs who then decided to apply their skills to reviving some of the city's less formal and less expensive restaurants rather than sticking to the more rigid conventions of the hotel dining room. He moved into Cartouche a decade ago and has been moulding this physically unusual restaurant around his broad frame (he was an enthusiastic second row forward for many years) ever since.

The first part of the restaurant consists of a dozen tables at street level but at the far end of this is a flight of stairs down to an invariably crowded bar. Here the building turns at 90 degrees and there is an exit on the far side to a completely different street (useful, our Parisian friend pointed out, if the police are chasing you). The whole area is panelled in dark wood to shoulder height and there is a slight air of damp near the door that leads directly down to the cellars that the restaurant still uses to keep its red wines at the correct temperature. The interior is comforting and reassuring - definitely not cutting edge.

The fun really starts when Paquin greets you with a disarming smile and runs through his menu. There are about a dozen starters, main courses and desserts and each dish is characterised by a combination of the use of an unusual or inexpensive ingredient that has been converted via his skills into something far more elaborate. As a result, prices are very fair: 9-15 euros for the starters; 20-25 euros for the main courses and 8 for the desserts.

The best example of this approach among the starters was a terrine of oxtail bound in leeks, with girolles (wild mushrooms) tossed in vinegar on the side. It was delicious and sophisticated even if none of the ingredients was. So too were a simple salad of girolles, a creamy pumpkin soup with parmesan; and a thick slice of a classic pâté en croute enriched with foie gras.

Paquin has an obvious tendresse for game, so it is worth looking out for any venison dish that may be on the menu, but one dish that really caught my eye was a casserole of pork, slowly cooked with white wine and dried apricots and served at the table in a cast iron pot. Half a dozen plump scallops with leeks and a fillet of cod with wild mushrooms looked equally enticing. The star of the desserts was a block of three layers of crisp, almond encrusted biscuit, held together by a mixture of fresh fruit and sweetened cream.

Cartouche delighted on two other fronts. The first is the wine list, which Paquin has obviously assembled with great passion and includes some of France's best producers, particularly from Burgundy and the Rhône, again at fair prices. The final page is devoted to magnums for the thirsty.

Finally, there are the opening and farewell touches. As soon as our order was taken, a dish of serious rillettes arrived to tide us over until our first course arrived. Then with the coffee came some delicious sweet and slightly salty biscuits – sort of superior shortbread - which they sell at the bar for five euros a tin. Don't leave Cartouche without one.

Le Repaire de Cartouche, 8 boulevard Filles-du-Calvaire, 75011 Paris. 01.47.00.25.86. Closed Sunday and Monday.