RN74 - a 16-year dream

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RN74, which opened on the ground floor of the Millennium Tower just south of San Francisco's financial district in April, is the culmination of a food and wine adventure that its driving force, Rajat Parr, 36, first set out on from his home town of Calcutta, India. It then took him to Paris and Burgundy in France and, perhaps most significantly, Tunbridge Wells in Kent, south-east England, in 1993.

This last town may be a surprising inclusion but Parr is keen not to underplay quite how influential his stay there once was. 'I had decided to become a chef when I went there to visit my uncle and he was the first person to introduce me to wine. It was an experience that changed my life', he said.

Parr spent the next three years training as a chef, but no sooner had he finished his studies at the Culinary Institute of America than he switched sides. In a move that is perhaps more common in the US than elsewhere, he began on the lowest rung of the waiter's ladder at Rubicon, the San Francisco restaurant that is sadly now closed but was once renowned for its wine list then compiled by sommelier Larry Stone, whom Parr regards as his mentor.

Nine years ago Parr began to dream of running his own wine bar and started to write the business plan for it. The subsequent dot.com downturn dashed his plans but the name, RN74, was now lodged in his consciousness.

'I have been a burgundy fan since 1996', Parr confessed, 'and as I began to study wine I realised that most of the wine from the Loire or Bordeaux was transported by boat but Burgundy was landlocked. RN74 was the name of the major road that leads out of the area – although it has now been changed to D974.'

Parr eventually became wine director for chef Michael Mina, whose 15 restaurants now stretch from San Francisco to Washington DC, but as Parr's concept developed, he realised that to survive financially it would have to be a restaurant with a wine bar attached to generate the food sales necessary to survive, particularly at lunchtime. Then as he waited in Paris's Gare du Lyon for a train to Burgundy, the final piece of the jigsaw fell into place.

'I was sitting there watching the board with the train destinations turn over and wondered how we could duplicate this but replacing the place names with the wines on our list. This is what now runs the whole length of one wall and at the far end is a shorter board with about 10 wines on it where we list our bin ends, those we only have a little stock of', Parr explained with an obvious sense of pride at seeing his long-cherished dream finally come to fruition.

I had gone to see Parr 10 days after an excellent dinner at RN74 when he had been back in Burgundy yet again, tasting and buying wine. We had eaten and drunk very well but I had also been struck by how many small elements of the restaurant's design had been so carefully considered. [See, for example, the levitating table - JR]

The receptionist's desk is right by the front door to welcome guests but also allows whoever is working there a clear view of the dining room and bar. Even on a busy night the noise level was not too high as strips of material had been hung across the ceiling to keep this to a minimum. There was only one large floral display in the centre of the room, which means that not too much money is being spent on such luxuries, and the menu's typeface was big enough to read easily even after the lights were dimmed. Even the lavatories were distinctive, with their own sound system playing the sound track from one of several French films, including *Amélie* and *Jules et Jim.*

I arranged to meet Parr to find out more. He was quick to pass credit for many of these details to AvroKo, the New York-based design company he had first shown his photos of Burgundian vineyards to for inspiration. But he added that these soundtracks are an integral part of his own vision of what restaurants ought to be: vehicles for taking customers away to another place for as long, or as short, a time they have available. 'It's about establishing a sense of being somewhere different', he added, 'but in a modern setting.'

RN74's location means that the chef Jason Berthold has to create very different menus: at lunch where many can spend no more than 45 minutes and a more elaborate dinner menu along with food to be served at the bar. But he does adhere to Parr's stricture that there should be only one ingredient on the plate - 'deliciousness' was the word he used - 'and

nothing crazy, no foams or powders'. This approach was exemplified in a sautéed pork belly with clams; Maine scallops with sugar snap peas, tomatoes and pear; duck with barley and shiitake mushrooms; and an elegant dessert of perfect peaches, blackberries and crisp cubes of toasted brioche.

Berthold is helped in this approach by the fact that the bountiful Farmers' Market at San Francisco's Ferry Plaza operates three days a week only a few blocks away. Parr admitted that this particular emphasis on fruit and light desserts had met with some criticism from diners more used to a heavy injection of sugar at this stage in the meal, but that he was not going to allow this to change his approach. His other decision to remove all bottles of Chardonnay, Syrah and Pinot Noir that are over 14% alcohol from his list is one that, I hope, will be followed by many other restaurateurs.

RN74 is a joint venture that cost $4.5 million between Parr, Mina and Wilf Jaeger, a generous Bay Area wine collector who has provided the older bottles from his cellar as the basis for RN74's stunning wine list.

But it represents, as Parr readily admitted, 'totally my dream'. Over what he subsequently confessed was his very first lunch in the restaurant - he normally sits at a small table behind the receptionist watching and working on his laptop - he recalled the speech he had given to all his staff before they opened for business. 'I had prepared something quite formal but when I saw the restaurant and realised that this was the fruition of what I had wanted for so long, I threw my speech away and just said, "Let's make people happy – then we'll be happy."'

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