# A restaurant called Chapelle

26 Nov 2009 by Nick Lander/FT

My first visit to La Chapelle and Café de Luxe, the restaurant and cafe just opened by the brothers Chris and Jeff Galvin close to Liverpool Street station and the City, was almost my last to any restaurant.

It was six weeks before the official opening of these interlinked establishments. The builders had finished, so hard hats were no longer required, but the site was full of shopfitters and kitchen engineers. The Galvins walked in, already imagining every seat full of happy customers, while I was some distance behind them, impressed by this tasteful and obviously expensive transformation of a girls' school built in 1890.

As I walked past the kitchens a roll of heavy flooring material propped up against a wall began to slide and, gathering momentum, fell on to my shoulder, narrowly missing my head but knocking the notebook out of my hand. Unfortunately too, the bar was not yet stocked with any reviving liquid.

I was in this position because of the mutual respect between myself and the Galvins since they first cooked in my former restaurant over 20 years ago.

While I, like many others, have come to enjoy their excellent bistrot on Baker Street W1 and their more refined restaurant on top of the Hilton Hotel at Hyde Park Corner, they have occasionally sought my professional opinion.

Four years ago they asked me to lunch before they had signed the lease on their bistrot. Their concern was not so much a lack of confidence as the fact that this site had proved unsuccessful for a restaurateur then considered to have the golden touch. Was the site and location jinxed, they wanted to know? I countered that their vision of a good-value French bistrot would be perennially popular, especially since theirs would have two pairs of chefs' broad shoulders to rely on rather than just one. Happily I was right, although the credit is entirely theirs.

One distinguishing feature of these brothers is how each has seen the food and wine adventures they have embarked on as young cooks as more than a substitute for the schooling that failed to inspire them and that they readily admit they were not very good at. Recipes; travel; friendship with other chefs; and even the glass of wine at the end of a busy evening, have all been the inspiration for extending their own culinary repertoire and therefore what they can offer their customers. Chris Galvin (pictured here at the pass) admitted that the range of cigars in their new outdoor lounge represents his new taste horizon.

It was a research trip through France earlier this year that provided the inspiration for the restaurant's name and an integral piece of the cafe's kitchen.

While wine tasting in the northern Rhône, Chris first saw La Chapelle, the small chapel on the famous hill of Hermitage which gives its name to Paul Jaboulet Ainé's world-renowned Hermitage La Chapelle. He felt inspired not only to borrow the name, fitting since the girls' school was built to be part of a nearby church and its high roof does have ecclesiastical overtones, but also to buy 20 vintages of this wine, four of which are available by the glass. The rest of the wine list, collated by sommelier Andrea Briccarello, is equally fascinating but less expensive.

And while eating in Alsace, Galvin subsequently succumbed to the simpler, less expensive charms of their 'tarte flambée', a crisp, thin dough topped with crème fraîche, finely chopped onions and strips of bacon. So the café now has a wood-burning oven for him to experiment with.

The unusual combination of a restaurant in a 19th-century building and the café in its 21st-century addition works well. A small mezzanine addition in the restaurant, with a table for ten, cleverly reduces the overall volume and some very effective lighting makes it look and feel far more romantic than its original architects ever intended. The two separate kitchens provide the bridge between the two and there is a gap wide enough above the service counter for any keen cook to watch what is going on.

Jeff presides over the kitchen for La Chapelle where a simple classic menu includes his signature dish of a lasagne of Dorset crab; a salad of wood-fired autumn vegetables with walnuts and goat's cheese; and a wonderfully satisfying

tagine of pigeon among a catholic range of dishes. The service, however, is currently too formal – waiters unfurling and draping napkins over their customers' lap is no longer necessary.

Chris's less complex café menu reveals a series of French classics such as a rich pumpkin soup; hanger steak, served rare only, with gratin potatoes; an unctuous black pudding with apples and mashed potato; and a range of desserts, chocolate pot, rum baba, crème brulée and lemon tart that few will tire of since they are so well executed. The opening prices are very reasonable and far better value for money than in Paris.

According to Sara Galvin, Chris's wife and in her role as the person with overall responsibility for looking after the customer, the rose between two thorns, the scope of what they have created has surprised even her. 'It's a very grown up restaurant, isn't it?' she said with a smile. But like a piece of fine tailoring, it is a restaurant the Galvins, and their customers, will grow into with style in the years to come.

La Chapelle and Café de Luxe www.galvinrestaurants.com