

## A tale of two restaurants

22 Jan 2010 by Nick Lander/FT

Our bridge game began with two complaints even before we had looked at the cards. And, as they were about restaurants, they were naturally addressed to me.

One was about the disappointing food at Il Baretto, an upmarket Italian wine bar in Marylebone, while the other was over the £260 bill for four with just one bottle of wine at Les Trois Garçons in Shoreditch, east London. 'A rip-off', my normally unruffled friend called it.

Sadly, I was able to trump them. Earlier that week I had taken my wife on an impulse to Marcus Wareing at The Berkeley Hotel in Knightsbridge for two different reasons. As the *FT*'s wine correspondent, she had just that day tasted 100 2008 Burgundies (see [today's article](#) and [Burgundy 2008 - a guide](#)) and, I thought, deserved a good and restorative dinner. Furthermore, my opinion that The Greenhouse restaurant in Mayfair currently offers the most exciting combination of French food and wine had recently been challenged by someone who had spoken in favour of Wareing. I left The Berkeley, however, with a bill of £216 for two, including only a half bottle of Austrian white, no coffee, and a huge amount of disappointment.

The reasons for this disappointment were several: a dull, particularly dark room; a pedestrian menu that seems not to relate to the seasons; a very expensive wine list; and waiting staff whose approach was just too formal.

The meal was little better. There was a striking similarity between the amuse-bouche of a glass of carrot soup and the pre-dessert of a passion-fruit mousse in both presentation and colour. The fillet of turbot I was served as my main course could only be described as mean, given a menu price of £75 for three courses, while the meal itself lacked those vital ingredients of freshness and acidity. I think a competent maitre d' would have ensured that a waiter with an open cold sore on his mouth was not in direct contact with customers, perhaps moving him to work temporarily behind the bar.

Four days later, Wareing's restaurant kept its two stars in the 2010 *Michelin Guide to Great Britain & Ireland*, part of the symbiotic relationship between those still aiming to execute food at this level and those who have long, but no longer I believe, been considered the custodians of its reputation. The guide's simultaneous elevation of The Ledbury in Notting Hill from one to two stars gave me the opportunity to compare Wareing with the Ledbury's Australian chef, Brett Graham (second from the right in the photo below).

Whether Wareing was in the kitchen on the night we ate there I don't know - there was no sign of him or any other chef - but I did overhear on our way out of The Ledbury on the next Monday evening that we had eaten on Graham's night off. But my bill of £202.50 for two with a bottle of mature white Burgundy only whetted my appetite to return.

Here was a menu that challenged all the senses, particularly a starter of celeriac baked in ash and the aromas from a main course of pigeon, served two tables away under a glass dome, which filled the room. Most exciting was the juxtaposition of inexpensive ingredients alongside more expensive ones to create delicious dishes no amateur chef has the confidence to produce, most notably a first course of grilled and cured mackerel with a small crepe of finely diced cucumber. My fillet of John Dory was considerably larger than Wareing's turbot had been, to which the accompanying pumpkin gnocchi and clementine puree were an excellent foil. A fairly priced, very well chosen wine list and the opportunity to hear the excited cries of 'Service, service' from the basement kitchen as the chefs demand the return of the waiting staff were further inducements.

As I studied the two bills, one other significant difference between these two restaurants became obvious. At The Berkeley, two words appear in large type, larger even than those of the hotel, and these not surprisingly belong to Marcus Wareing. Despite the fact that any restaurant is a team effort, his is the only name. On The Ledbury's bill, there is no mention at all of Graham's name but there is mention in small type of one other individual, the personable manager Sarah (front row, second from the left), who had expressed such delight at Graham's latest award, asking us 'Have you heard?'

Such team spirit is what underpins any good restaurant, not the talents of any one chef, whether Wareing, Ramsay, or Ducasse at The Dorchester, where again I have only been disappointed. It is encouraging to see Michelin recognise the

quality of food in British pubs by awarding one star to The Harwood Arms in Fulham (in which Graham is a partner) and The Royal Oak in Maidenhead. But I am sure that it is in their customers' best interests not to mention the chef's name.

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