Eating out in the Loire valley

9 Sep 2010 by Nick Lander/FT

Over the past 30 years during which I initially bought, sold and highly recommended the extremely food-friendly wines of the Loire valley as a restaurateur and then subsequently enjoyed them as a customer, I have only visited the region once. And that was a day trip to the vineyards of Vouvray, a long-standing attraction for so many Parisians.

Two days spent further west, where the vineyards around the towns of Saumur and Chinon make such distinctive reds and the villages of Savennières, Layon and Bonnezeaux produce great, appetising white wines, introduced me to three restaurants that reflect very different aspects of French cooking: the new and exciting; the definitely passé; and the charms of a wine bar/bistro that time, I hope, will never adulterate.

While each of these naturally highlights the fruits of the local producers, Loire wines on restaurant wine lists outside the region have invariably been chosen for a very specific reason. Either the restaurateur particularly likes them; the chef feels they go well with the food; or the sommelier feels particularly proud of them. They are never included simply to impress potential customers who rarely give them the attention they deserve.

This is a shame because these wines invariably represent some of the best value on any list. The reds, even with some bottle age, are rarely expensive. They go well with a whole range of food, red and white meat, fish and cheese (I now know that white Savennières goes well with cheese, too); they are not generally very alcoholic; and, white or red, they can stand a few minutes in an ice bucket which makes them even more refreshing. This combination of freshness and acidity also makes them fun to drink with more spicy food.

But flying the flag for these wines has been an uphill struggle for restaurateurs. London's most committed evangelist, Nigel Wilkinson at RSJ, a stone's throw from the National Theatre on the Southbank, admitted that this mission has been 'pleasure and pain in equal proportions.'

I thought of Wilkinson when we walked into **Le Pot de Lapin**, close to the banks of the Loire in Saumur, as its proprietor, Olivier Thibault, displays a similar joie de vivre about his role - although here the proprietor wears chef's whites. Thibault is also a firm believer in multi-tasking. Behind a small bar he prepared some spicy green olives for our aperitif with his left hand, poured two glasses of wine with his right and, with his mobile wedged under one ear, politely informed the caller that they were regrettably fully booked that night.

This seemed quite understandable as this place is fun. The small wine bar offers an extensive range of local wines by the glass, none more expensive than four euros. The compact restaurant next door is decorated with wine memorabilia including, worryingly precariously, a host of metal wine carriers hanging from nails on the ceiling just above the tables.

But all eyes are focused on the enormous blackboard which lists an extensive range of simple but hearty dishes: tapas; two excellent first courses in particular, a chicken terrine laced with thin slices of chorizo and potted rabbit with a well-dressed salad; and a regional speciality, fricassee of chicken Angevine, cooked with the white wine of nearby Anjou.

Location, personality and great value for money contribute to Le Pot de Lapin's popularity, but all these attributes seemed to be missing as we parked among the isolated vineyards of the Coteaux du Layon at Domaine de la Bergerie. But behind the modern exterior of **La Table de la Bergerie** (which supplied the image above) is not just some very fine cooking but also a story of love, courage and ingenuity.

The last two qualities were immediately obvious when the chef/proprietor, David Guitton, put down his crutches by the kitchen door to welcome us and then went back to the stoves. He proceeded to cook admirably successfully all by himself for the next couple of hours, navigating his small kitchen by propelling himself on his good leg while the other rested on a chair on castors, in the style of a skateboarder.

Why Guitton, who has trained with Alain Ducasse and Joel Robuchon in London and Monte Carlo, is here and in this condition are closely interlinked. He married Anne, the daughter of the family that has made wine in the surrounding vineyards for seven generations, and six months ago they realized their joint dream of opening a restaurant on the property. The chef then decided to turn his hand to DIY and, while on a stepladder, fell and broke his heel. Through

gritted teeth, he told me that most regrettably he had to close for 10 days, but now the full kitchen brigade, Guitton himself, is back to almost full strength. Thanks to his mobile chair.

And, of course, his innate talent and approach that combined with such limited resources, results in a menu with two choices at each course that changes every fortnight. Thick slices of citrus-marinated bream with courgettes and Parmesan; a chilled rocket soup with a tomato tartare and prawns; lamb with aubergines and piquillo peppers; and a fillet of John Dory with an infusion of hyssop were all truly first class, the sort of food that would not be out of place at a very smart address in Paris. His menu also modestly lists his six major suppliers including a local cheesemonger, Hugues Bocahut, whose Valencay, Saint Nectaire and 38-month Comte were among the finest examples of these cheeses I have ever eaten.

Freshness is the key to Guitton's cooking, an intangible but essential factor that makes the diner feel even better after the meal. But this element was crucially missing from the far more intricate cooking of Mikaël Pihours at **Le Gambetta**, the long standing one-star Michelin in the centre of Saumur, despite the attentive presence of his wife, Céline, in the dining room.

Here is a kitchen trying too hard on all fronts, from six different amuses-bouches, including a ridiculous concoction of tandoori spiced popcorn, to a dessert described as 'Memories of Childhood' that was just far too sweet – and was then followed by four different petits fours. The meal was saved, however, by a well-chosen wine list including a 2009 Saumur Champigny from Thierry Germain that, in the manner of all well-made red Loires (and 2009 is an excellent vintage) went extremely well with their over-elaborate renditions of monkfish and guinea fowl.

While this visit reinforced my faith in Loire wines, it also made me realize quite how difficult it is to explore its vineyards and restaurants which are far more spread out than many others, even in France, and invariably tucked away down winding, narrow country lanes. In the evenings the police are, justifiably, out in force, but we discovered the taxi drivers of Saumur all seem to want to be in bed by 9.30pm. A dedicated driver is essential.

Le Pot de Lapin, 35 rue Rabelais, Saumur, 02.41.67.12.86. Closed Sunday and Monday.

La Table de Bergerie, Layon www.latable-bergerie.fr

Le Gambetta, Saumur www.restaurantlegambetta.com

RSJ, London www.rsj.uk.com *[see the members forum for comments on some of the wines sold by RSJ]*