Turning meat into fish at The Square

12 Jan 2011 by Nick Lander

It was just before 8 pm at The Square restaurant in Mayfair, London. Several customers had already sat down to eat but most of the 70 who were booked that night were in the bar, still perusing the menu or yet to arrive.

In the private room just off the kitchen the 18 customers who had convened for a wine dinner to taste 16 vintages of Ridge Monte Bello, one of America's finest wines, from 1999 back to 1978, were just finishing their canapés and champagne before they too sat down.

Swiftly but unexpectedly, César Lopes, the manager in charge of the private room, dashed into the kitchen to speak to Philip Howard (pictured), The Square's highly experienced chef and co-owner. There was a problem.

Maureen, the well-travelled wife of Ridge's long time director Paul Draper, had flown into London that morning from California and, as a result of an encounter with something dubious she had eaten before leaving home, she did not feel strong enough for the three meat courses that had been chosen to accompany the wines. She had asked, Lopes reported, whether it would be possible to have some fish instead.

Howard had little time to react. Unlike in a hotel, where there are separate kitchens to look after the private dining rooms, the one kitchen at The Square services both rooms. A delay serving one room may easily lead to other customers' having to wait too long in the other. Howard also had to consider that the meat dishes had been chosen to go with increasingly young wines so any fish dishes must do the same. And, most importantly for his own and the restaurant's reputation, he had to ensure that the style and presentation of what would be served to the non-meat eater remained as high in his two-star Michelin restaurant as the quality of what he knew would be served to the rest of the table.

A few four-letter words later and after a brief consultation with the chef in charge of his fish section, Howard dictated a three course fish menu to Lopes who then went into the office next door to print it out. Instead of a risotto with chanterelles, pigeon and truffles there was to be a sauté of langoustine tails with Parmesan gnocchi and truffles. The venison Wellington with celeriac was to be replaced by a risotto of wild mushrooms with Orkney scallops and black truffles, while a loin of monkfish with ceps and red wine would take the place of the aged rib of beef with bone marrow. This menu was then slipped in front of Mrs Draper's place just before she sat down. She left The Square feeling that she had been treated regally.

The following week I sat opposite Howard and Lopes in The Square's private dining room at 10.30 am, sadly devoid of any food or wine, to discover how the kitchen had been able to react so promptly, to turn a potentially difficult situation into one with such a happy ending.

'I don't believe customers ever really comprehend quite how complicated kitchens are and quite how easily they can be thrown off track,' Howard explained. 'From the time the first order comes in, the pistons start turning and it's my job, rather like the first engineer on an ocean-going liner, to ensure that they turn faster and faster throughout the evening yet just as smoothly. But the smallest thing can knock a kitchen off track, whether it's a plate of food being sent back because it's too cold or a waiter reporting that a table whose food we're in the middle of preparing has just gone outside for a cigarette. Everything has to stop and the consequences can be catastrophic.'

In this case everything went smoothly, an outcome that Howard tried to explain away by modestly adding that 'the gods must have been smiling'. But, it transpired, more active human intervention was involved.

The first factor that made this instant transition from a meat to a fish menu possible was the kitchen's reliance on seasonal ingredients. That made the new first course appear quite straightforward as Howard was able to adapt a dish from the a la carte menu that incorporated ingredients that were not too strong, slightly mellow and transmitted the same level of luxury.

The black truffle with the risotto and scallops served the same purpose in the second course. And while Howard and his fish chef were debating whether to serve monkfish or turbot as the main course, the two strongest fish that invariably go best with any red wine, their decision was facilitated by the realisation that they had served a red-wine-based fish sauce

on their fixed-price lunch menu that day and it was still in peak condition. A quick tasting led them both to decide it suited monkfish better than turbot.

Howard was delighted to hear that in this instance Mrs Draper and all those around her table that evening had left his restaurant in such a happy frame of mind. While he fully sympathised with her particular reasons for wanting to adapt his menu, Howard, like so many other chefs around the world, is facing demands from an increasing number of customers who want their dishes changed because of allergies to specific ingredients.

And while the spirit is willing - Howard cited one couple who have become regular customers because his staff were able to accommodate their requests for several changes to his menu on their first visit - the only successful way any kitchen can be sure of responding sympathetically is with as much notice as possible.

The Square, www.squarerestaurant.com