

## Fergus Henderson, hotelier

19 Jan 2011 by Nick Lander/FT

Fergus Henderson, the most influential British chef of his generation in my opinion, is about to leave his fourth distinctive culinary imprint on the streets of London.

Some time in February the builders will finally move out of what was for many years Manzi's seafood restaurant just off Leicester Square (where I had my initial interview with my future mother-in-law in 1981) and the St John Hotel will emerge. This will include a new restaurant, bar and 15 bedrooms (Fergus Henderson inspects one of them below) and face directly onto London's first W Hotel with its restaurant, Spice Market, inspired by New York chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten, which is opening on 14 February.

Henderson's new menu will be radically different from St John, Smithfield, and St John Bread & Wine in Spitalfields (his other outpost is the St John bakery in Bermondsey, source of the finest sourdough bread, Eccles cakes and doughnuts but open to the public only on Saturday mornings) because it will follow one of his guiding principles. What Henderson creates are, he explains modestly, 'recipes for buildings'.

The original St John focuses heavily on meat and offal because it is located in a former smokehouse, although the offal image hides the fact that this kitchen cooks fish and vegetarian food just as well, particularly a fennel and Berkswell bake. The menu at Spitalfields evolves throughout the day to appeal to a younger, more relaxed clientele.

The food at the new hotel will not just reveal for the first time Henderson's take on breakfast (ably assisted by his accomplished baker Justin Piers Gellatly) but also acknowledge the presence of the many dim sum restaurants that surround it. Years of selfless R&D have gone into creating St John's own breakfast bun, sweeter than a croissant apparently, while sweet and savoury buns, filled variously with chocolate, prunes and anchovies, will feature on the hotel's afternoon-tea menu.

Considerable as these achievements are, Henderson's influence has extended so far beyond the walls of his own restaurants that he now deserves his own blue plaque for the culinary wisdom he has distilled.

This revolves around two seemingly simple themes. The first is that the chef must use the appropriate seasonal produce respectfully; be magnanimous in the two or three ingredients that constitute any dish; and waste as little as possible. The corollary of this is that each component has to be of the highest standard. At St John Bread & Wine recently, the shortbread biscuit with the blood orange jelly and the pastry on top of the rhubarb pie were exemplary.

To the customer, Henderson's approach means menu descriptions that are brief, no more than four words, and bereft of any pretension whatsoever. Read the menu carefully, choose and enjoy.

To those chefs who have followed in his wake, this has resulted in nothing less than a massive dose of what any skilled craftsman needs: a daily injection of confidence. By combining that well-known architectural maxim 'less is more' with great taste and a professional interest in encouraging young chefs, whom he describes as 'ripening fruit', Henderson has allowed the many who have followed his approach to stand tall.

My idea of a blue plaque, a particularly British tradition that links a well-known individual to an inspirational site and dates back to 1866, would not need referring to English Heritage, who now administer this scheme, but rather to the Mayor of Paris. Because the requisite wall would be on the Marché du Saint-Honoré in the first arrondissement, home to Le Rubis.

Le Rubis, a long-established wine bar with a small restaurant on the first floor, is where Henderson fell in love with the obvious joy good food and wine can impart, when he was first drawn there 30 years ago as a student at the Architectural Association. He returned on his honeymoon and, according to Margot, his wife, firmly raising her eyebrows, 'we spent every single lunchtime there'.

Although the owners of Le Rubis have changed, staggeringly little else has. The paint is still yellow, the chairs are still red.

Maps of French vineyards, old black-and-white photos and the menus cover the walls; the bar is crowded, particularly in the evenings as the prices are very reasonable, but those working behind the counter still manage to acknowledge their regular customers and nod them towards any table that may be coming vacant.

The menu upstairs comprises simple, hearty dishes while downstairs a wide range of sandwiches on baguettes and Poilâne bread is served. A regular remarked to me in admiration that the staff at Le Rubis manage to butter the bread in such a manner that there seems to be more butter on the knife when they have finished than at the beginning.

But as much as what he ate and drank at Le Rubis, it was the principles it instilled in Henderson that have defined his career. It planted in him, he told me, a sense of pleasure; of the need to treat all customers equally regardless of class or income; and the realisation that pretension and quality are not bedfellows. 'It was here' Henderson explained, 'that I learnt the art of sitting and eating'.

The Mayor of Paris may be accommodating because two chefs who trained under Henderson in London have recently opened Le Bal Café. And Parisiens seem to love it.

Anna Trattles and Alice Quillet are in the kitchen of Le Bal Café, while the latter's husband, Anselme Blayney, and Ivan Kouzmine manage the tables. The dishes - smoked eel with pickles, a lamb shank with turnips and a lemon buttermilk pudding - are bereft of adjectives but stuffed with flavour.

Henderson would be very proud. As England should be of him.

**St John Hotel**, [www.stjohnhotellondon.com](http://www.stjohnhotellondon.com)

**Le Rubis**, 10 rue Marché Saint-Honoré, 1st arrondissement, 00 33 1 42 61 03 34

**Le Bal Café**, [www.le-bal.fr](http://www.le-bal.fr)