

London wine bar scene's unlikely roots

23 Feb 2011 by Nick Lander/FT

Blackpool in Lancashire, Loughborough near Leicester, Dewsbury in Yorkshire, Coventry in the heart of England and Shepherd's Bush in west London have not, until now, been recognised as areas of culinary excellence.

But the kitchens of two recently opened London restaurants - Brawn near Columbia Market in east London and the second branch of Vinoteca just north of Marble Arch - are manned to very good effect by chefs from these diverse parts of the country.

The restaurants have a lot in common - most obvious in their passion for wine. Brawn, a sibling to Terroirs by Charing Cross station, is owned by a wine company while Vinoteca doubles as a wine shop.

Each menu also offers the opportunity to enjoy the simple pleasures of cured pork. Under the heading 'Pig' at Brawn are their own terrines, rillettes and plates of ham from France and Italy while Vinoteca offers a plate of Spanish meats with almonds, olives and a glass of manzanilla sherry.

The chefs - Owen Kenworthy, 30, Adam Parker, 21, and head chef Ed Wilson, 34, at Brawn; head chef Will Leigh, 32 (above right), and Harry Faddy, 28 (above left), at Vinoteca - display their particular skills in other dishes, and at both establishments there is a clear emphasis on strong, clean, distinct flavours.

Highlights at Brawn include grilled Dorset clams; spatchcocked quail with romesco; mongetes, a slow-cooked bean casserole from south-west France; and a comforting panna cotta with blood oranges. Vinoteca's team distinguish themselves with a spinach, fennel and watercress soup; red mullet fillets with aioli; Gressingham duck breast with peas and mint; and a refreshing rhubarb fool.

Vinoteca's low-ceilinged dining room is home to three green leather couches while Brawn's white brickwork is enlivened by the work of French artist Michel Tolmer. Both places are utilitarian rather than overly comfortable - Vinoteca's tables and chairs were bought on eBay at a fraction of retail prices - and both boast open kitchens, which provide ample opportunity to watch these British chefs at work.

I returned to Brawn at midday to quiz Kenworthy, busy making the romesco sauce, and Parker, his surname tattooed under his left arm, as he baked the field mushrooms to be subsequently stuffed with bone marrow, garlic and parsley, on their respective career paths.

Kenworthy explained that he started in what he called his mother's kitchen army. 'Mine is a big family - four sisters and three brothers - so every meal was for at least 10 and each one of us was given a specific job: washing, mopping and drying and then graduating to peeling the potatoes, making cakes and the Yorkshire pudding every Sunday. The only job I didn't like was salting the porridge', he confessed with a smile.

Blackpool's tourism industry meant no shortage of hotels and banqueting halls. At 15, Kenworthy was earning pocket money in one of these before catering college, followed by a memorable stint at one of the long-established hotels in the Lake District. By 2004 he was in London cooking at The Wolseley, where he first met Wilson.

What distinguished Parker was not just the speed with which he navigated the small kitchen space behind Kenworthy but also his sheer enthusiasm for his job, although apparently his heart was initially set on becoming a policeman. He began by washing pots and pans but by 17 he was down in London cooking and over the next four years a series of jobs brought him into contact with Kenworthy, whom he continually referred to as 'Chef Owen'. 'It's just great working with people who love food and wine', he enthused. 'And I get paid for it!'

As our conversation was drawing to an end, Wilson came to the counter with a copy of the previous night's menu to check with Kenworthy whether any ingredients were missing for that day's service. As they went through all the dishes, these two chefs, born on either side of the Pennines, instantly reverted to kitchen French as Kenworthy responded 'Oui' or 'Non, Chef'.

When I arrived at 3.30 pm to ask the same of Vinoteca's chefs, Leigh squashed my hand in a handshake, before asking

me to take a seat while he finished confiting some shallots.

Both Leigh and Faddy share a similar physique and demeanour - broad shoulders, generous girths and genial faces - but came to cooking via very different routes.

Leigh recalls writing a 'cookery book' aged six that included recipes for cheese sauce and salad sauce (a dressing really), inspired by his mother's cooking and formative trips to France. A preference for beer and skittles over writing a university application form brought him to London and a job with my colleague Rowley Leigh, before travel to Australia and the kitchens of various restaurants in west London, where he first met Faddy.

'This kitchen is the most basic and open I've ever worked in', he explained. 'All I have are two ovens, six burners and a grill. When customers come up and say thanks, they've had a good meal, I am usually too busy to mumble more than a few words. But we are just trying to cook good ingredients as naturally as possible.'

In this goal, Leigh is well served by Faddy, whose mother and uncle were both professional chefs, although he recalls that his mother's temper when things went wrong could easily have put him off. But a stint making sandwiches in a health club opened his eyes to the fun of the kitchen, an interest that was broadened by travel across south-east Asia.

These two restaurants exude a singularly confident approach for which these five unlikely chefs are mainly responsible.

Vinoteca, www.vinoteca.co.uk

Brawn, www.brawn.co