Young Turks in the kitchen

20 Apr 2011 by Nick Lander/FT

Now that the annual invasion of London by chefs and restaurateurs attending the World's Best Restaurants Awards, both philosophically and arithmetically specious in my opinion, has been and gone, it is time for me to make a prediction. In 10 years the world's top chefs will be even more exciting and less predictable than those working today.

By this comment, I cast no aspersions on Ferran Adrià, Thomas Keller, Grant Achatz or Michel Troisgros. But I do believe that the current batch of chefs in their mid to late twenties, working long hours as they travel the world, have not only had the benefit of extraordinary teachers such as these but are also imbued with an unparalleled passion for the food itself, a passion which ultimately will lead them to overcome the economic problems that my generation has bequeathed them. In particular, how they finance their own restaurant.

It was in search of the particular solution to this challenge devised by two young British chefs, James Lowe, 31, and Isaac Mchale, 30, that I found myself in Hackney, east London, recently. I was looking for their temporary restaurant, which, I subsequently learnt, had only one sign and that was inside and very close to the kitchen. On a torn piece of cardboard resting on a cast-iron column were the words, Y Turks.

Mchale, a self-professed 'music nut', has borrowed the name Young Turks from his friend's record label, which at least allows the chefs and waiting staff to take advantage of some free T shirts.

All this became obvious after a somewhat tortuous struggle to find my way into a building that had been converted into flats several years ago, of which one with double height windows is now known as The Loft. This belongs to the same person who owns the building that houses Viajante restaurant nearby, and its domestic kitchen and dining room have doubled as a temporary restaurant for numerous chefs over the past two years.

The layout of the room immediately conveyed both a professional and distinctly amateur air. The two scrubbed wooden tables were neatly laid up for the 24 who had booked for a menu listing the six courses and matching wines. The glasses and cutlery were sparklingly clean. But although the chairs looked reasonably comfortable, not too many of them matched.

The two waiters passed around three canapés - gem lettuce curd and anchovy, their own cured ham and cheese, and smoked cod's roe - while the chefs dealt with a crisis on their mobiles. Six of those who had booked had failed to appear. Lowe and Mchale charge a reasonable £60 a head for their meals, inclusive of five wines and a small glass of brown stout with the moreish chocolate malt ice cream, service and coffee, but there is no margin for any no-shows. As a result, this particular service started 45 minutes late and ended in a loss.

But for the lucky 18 the show eventually got under way with baskets of bread from St John Bread & Wine (where Lowe was head chef before a stint at Noma, Copenhagen, while Mchale is the development chef at the renowned Ledbury, Notting Hill) and a first course of a poached pheasant egg with ramson, shards of wild garlic, and snails. Earthy, seasonal, not too costly, simple to serve and packed full of flavour, this dish set the bar for the others to exceed.

Three certainly did. Slices of two different colours of beetroot with iced goat's milk and elderberries which Lowe had pickled last summer revealed the direction Lowe has in mind for his style of cooking, taking British ingredients in the direction of new Nordic cooking that has so obviously inspired him. A simple combination of warm Jersey royal potatoes, monk's beard (an Italian green chicory currently in season) and white crab meat was stunningly good, as were two roast chickens, the breast meat of which was sliced thickly and served on a base of the dark meat, hop shoots and green onions.

Over five dinners and one lunch, aided by two waiters and a washer-up, Lowe and Mchale served 130 customers. Rather than doing alternate courses, they collaborate, usually via Google docs at 2 am when Mchale gets home from The Ledbury. So far they have created 30 new dishes, although none too profitably as yet.

Most kitchens aim for a food cost that is at most 30% of sales but Lowe confessed that theirs was closer to 50%, if not a little more. 'But this way of starting is great for ideas, for setting the groundwork and for allowing us to see the customers leaving happy. We want to learn, experiment, make friends, improve and get our names out there. The end game is our

own restaurant', Lowe added with conviction.

Plans for the next stage include renting out Lowe's flat in south London, which also doubles as the store for all their kitchen equipment, to allow them to finance a more central London site for a supper club. And to put on a repeat performance of the Young Turks in New York, cunningly just after the James Beard food and drink awards which take place in May, with friends who are already working as chefs and waiting staff over there.

In the process, Lowe and Mchale hope that while they're cooking, being talked about on Twitter, and playing to full houses except when this restaurant correspondent comes along, they will catch the eye of a sponsor who will see them as the next young British thing. 'We're not fussy', Mchale explained, with the sense of fun that seems to be a major part of his character. 'It could be Doc Martens, Paul Smith or Barbour or alternatively something more food related like Hildon or Maldon Salt.' Any restaurant with the name Young British Turks would certainly be beguiling - though I would suggest it should be clearly signalled. Outside.

Young Turks, youngturks.co