

Paris's best microclimates

20 Jul 2011 by Nick Lander/FT

A brief sojourn in Paris recently provided considerable material for my notebook.

It now includes a description of the luscious, green-tomato gazpacho hiding an olive oil sorbet served at L'Opéra restaurant structure inserted into the eastern wing of the 19th-century Opéra de Paris, which opened in early July and is conveniently located for Galeries Lafayette.

A similar combination of two very different eras was evident at Passage 53, which opened in 2009 in the Passage des Panoramas built in 1800. The culinary highlights of this meal were two exceptional fish dishes: a white bowl filled with white ingredients - cauliflower, cauliflower cream and barely grilled squid - and a whole razor clam diced, put back into its shell and served with edible flowers and a yuzu mousse.

Finally, there was the precision, and generosity, expressed initially in a spelt risotto with girolle mushrooms and then surpassed by the concentration of fraises des bois (wild strawberries) on top of an exquisitely thin tart at Taillevent, now 62 years old and back to its refined best.

But what this trip reinforced, and neither my notebook nor camera can do justice to, is my long-held opinion that after a couple of centuries a particular microclimate hovers over this city which somehow imbues the best kitchens and the dishes they serve with an extra layer of flavour. In the same way that wine writers attribute a wine's taste to terroir, the physical setting and microclimate of a vineyard, it has long seemed to me that the chefs and restaurateurs of Paris have a similar, highly distinctive advantage.

The Passage des Panoramas certainly has a particular microclimate. The byways of its various arcades are now mainly home to shops selling stamps and ancient postcards as well as restaurants called Duchesse or Chez Duc to appeal to those walking the tourist highway it has become.

No 53 is very different. It belongs to the sartorially elegant Guillaume Guedj, who runs the ten tables on the ground floor, and Japanese chef Shinichi Sato, who is in charge of the kitchens above (pictured). Passage 53 is further distinguished by two apparently unrelated physical objects: a small table outside covered in a white tablecloth and the most treacherous spiral staircase, so narrow that I can only assume all the waiting staff previously trained as acrobats.

The outside table acts as a halfway house. Passage 53 is wide enough only for the tables along each wall and a small central passageway for the waiters so that when supplies are delivered during service, they have to be concealed under this table. I watched as three boxes of cockerels were placed under the table, signed for and then, as the restaurant emptied, whisked upstairs.

The squid and razor-clam dishes aside, our meal was distinguished by an excellent rendition of guinea fowl with a lemon sauce and, as a dessert, cherries enveloped in fromage blanc. The service also paid as much attention to detail, most notably in the way our bottle of Dauvissat, La Forêt 2006 Chablis was moved in and out of the ice bucket to ensure it was always at optimum temperature.

Having watched the boxes of cockerels being carried through the restaurant, I was to see them again at the end of our meal after I had somehow managed to climb the winding stairs. Directly opposite is the open kitchen and while Sato climbed another narrow set of stairs to what I assume must be their only storeroom, another Japanese chef was boning the cockerels. I thanked the kitchen team for an excellent meal. A flickering smile crossed the lips of the brigade and a brief acknowledgement was returned. But not a moment was unnecessarily wasted. The onset of customers for dinner and the pressure of their own high standards precluded pleasantries.

The very highest standards associated for so long with Taillevent have, not surprisingly, been shaken by the death of its former owner and inspiration, Jean-Claude Vrinat, combined with the fact that 2009 was, owing to the economy, a poor trading year. Nobody goes into the restaurant business to stand around waiting for customers.

But self-belief, that vital ingredient in any performing art, has returned. Since January Taillevent has been in the hands of the Gardinier family, whose other interests range from Florida orange groves to Bordeaux's Château Phélan Ségur, and

this financial stability now obviously pumps up Jean-Marie Ancher, its general manager, and his team.

Ancher, who has run seven marathons in Paris and New York (most useful, he quipped, for running after customers who have not paid), has a particular tendresse for the US. Under his lapel is a badge of the US flag and he touched his heart in admiration as we talked of New York restaurateur Danny Meyer. If only Taillevent would follow the example of the best French restaurants around the world and would open on a Saturday night!

Our meal at L'Opéra restaurant was a late lunch on a grey Saturday when the bright white and flame red 1960's retro design by architect Odile Decq was certainly cheering, even if an encounter with the ultra-modern washbasins on the first floor was somewhat disconcerting.

Chefs Christophe Aribert and Yann Tanneau are aiming high with intricate dishes and prices of 30-50 euros for the main courses (the café outside is considerably less expensive). And while the gazpacho was excellent, two other first courses were disappointing: a salad with lettuce, peas, artichokes and walnuts was distinctly ordinary and ineptly dressed and while brioche, leeks and girolles can combine to make an excellent dish, there seemed no point in stuffing the brioche with potato.

These two obviously ambitious chefs should relax and not try too hard to compete with the interior. In time, I am sure, Paris's benign culinary microclimate will descend on their kitchen, too.

L'Opéra Restaurant, www.opera-restaurant.fr

Passage 53, www.passage53.com

Taillevent, www.taillevent.com