Tastings at Le Meurice, Paris

8 Aug 2011 by Julia Harding MW

Fancy a small but well-proportioned early-evening wine tasting at the stylish Le Meurice hotel and restaurant, just opposite the Tuileries? You might need cheap eats afterwards but one of their monthly tastings could be a good place to whet your appetite in what the owners describe as the place where 'the refined splendours of 18th-century architecture meet the design of Philippe Starck'. The hotel was redesigned in 2008 to celebrate its 200th anniversary. Incidentally, Salvador Dalí used to spend a month here every summer and he has left his traces, hence the restaurant Le Dalí.

After a summer break, Le Meurice's enthusiastic and totally unstuffy head sommelier Estelle Touzet (pictured) will continue her series of informal and lightly themed food and wine tastings known as 'Nocturnes 228' (228 being the name of the bar at the Meurice and the building number in the rue de Rivoli). Lasting an hour, between 7 and 8 pm one Thursday evening a month (see dates below), each one comprises four wines paired with four canapés created by three-Michelin-starred head chef Yannick Alléno. (Alléno earned Nick's passing but forthright praise as the author of one of his most memorable meals in 2007.)

Touzet came to London at the end of June to promote her programme of tastings and demonstrate her eclectic choice of wines (revolutionary would be a better word in the context of many French restaurants - for more on the good and the bad among sommeliers, see Jancis's recent article Sommeliers I have known) and her friendly but well-informed approach to this type of tasting.

Having begun her career in a kitchen, she now finds the interaction with people offered by the job of sommelier much more rewarding, although she also referred to the difficulties, not least the long and antisocial hours, of making your way up the ladder, and how for a woman in particular it often came to the choice between career and family - a choice she, at 29, has not yet had to make. Although she did add, 'In a few years, I will have to choose'. In this profession, women have to be better than men if they are going to succeed, she says with more relish than rancour.

When I discovered there were just four wines in the line-up, I was initially disappointed, but it was actually a nice change to take time over a few wines and the accompanying small dishes created by Alléno rather than race through many more only to feel frustrated at the lack of time and attention given to each element of pleasure and their combination.

Listed below are the wines and dishes that comprised this trailer for the Nocturnes 228. They weren't the most expensive nor the most famous of wines I have ever tasted but they all shared one very fine characteristic: purity. By this I mean a focus, a clarity, an integrity that was neither overcomplicated nor simple and one-dimensional; wines which showed their origin in a polished but not flashy style. I particularly loved the Coume del Mas blend of mostly Grenache Gris and Grenache Blanc.

Ahi tuna tartar with ponzu and yuzu drizzle
Polz, Thérèse Sauvignon Blanc 2008 Südsteiermark, Austria

Scottish lobster and Cromer crab with broad bean mousseline and ocean spray
Coume del Mas, Folio 2009 Collioure, France

Poached fillet of beef with black pepper celeriac remoulade
Felton Road, Bannockburn Pinot Noir 2008 Central Otago, NZ

Noisettes of lamb with feta cheese, tomato and basil
Mac Forbes, Gruyère Syrah 2007 Yarra Valley, Australia

The canapés were delicious and very well chosen to complement the wines, although you may well feel that the cost of a ticket, €90 a head, is relatively steep for an hour's entertainment, however delicious and educational. I couldn't see anywhere to book on the Meurice website but there's a phone number below. They also provide attractive post-card-size tasting notes and background info on each wine.

WHEN: 7-8 pm, 8 Sep (Syrah), 3 Nov (Riesling), 8 Dec (Cabernet - €140)

WHERE: Bar 228, Hôtel Le Meurice, 228 rue de Rivoli, 75001 Paris

RESERVATIONS: + 33 (0)1 44 58 10 66