New York breakfasts

3 Nov 2011 by Nick Lander/FT

Over breakfast with friends at Maialino in the Gramercy Park Hotel, New York, I became aware of two emerging social phenomena in the city.

The first, and more depressing, was evinced by a queue of young people that formed in front of the restaurant's large windows facing what is surely the city's prettiest park and was soon about 100-strong. The explanation, I discovered, was that the hotel was interviewing for new staff.

The more appetising fact was our friends' observation that an increasing number of good restaurants in the city are now opening for breakfast and that as a result the quality has never been higher.

Breakfast in one of the many coffee shops or diners across the US has always been of interest to visitors. The banter from the waitresses who have seen it all; the height of the stack of pancakes; the insipid coffee; and the fact that these places have so thoughtfully opened early enough to welcome jet-lagged families, have always made these places particularly memorable.

But what is happening today is more exciting on several fronts.

The first, and most important, is that these restaurants are responding to what their customers want. Breakfast meetings may not be high on everyone's list of their most favoured American exports but there is no doubt that they are here to stay on both sides of the Atlantic. And they can be highly effective, given that they are invariably fixed around a specific time slot. (I wonder how many begin with one or other party saying 'I have to be away by 8.45 am at the latest'?) And with no alcohol, these rendezvous can often be the most productive as well as representing the best value.

But their growing popularity has two very different consequences for the restaurateur and his or her staff.

The first is the early and immediate stimulus this new business gives to the entire restaurant. Cecconi's in Mayfair, usefully located on a corner site close to many in the hedge fund and fashion worlds, can now serve as many as 150 for breakfast over three hours on a weekday morning, when it was originally, and quite firmly, closed for business.

This means not just as much as an extra £2,000 in takings before lunch begins but also, far more beneficially for customers, an early adrenalin rush for both the kitchen and waiting staff. And if there was one point all restaurateurs who now oversee a busy breakfast trade were in agreement about it was that a successful early morning session can lead to a smoother lunch service and in turn an even more accomplished performance in the evening.

But what restaurateurs are also beginning to appreciate is quite how the breakfast menu, even with its relatively humble ingredients, can be an exceptional opportunity to show off.

This is principally due to the fact that a memorable breakfast is a sum of its ingredients. But now that there are so many diligent producers keen to make and deliver the crispest baguette, the freshest eggs, several types of butter, jams from those fruits that have just come into season, as well as roasting the freshest coffee and sourcing the most distinctive tea, suddenly the breakfast menu becomes an immediate reflection of the restaurateur's affinity with his or her suppliers.

If the selection of breakfast ingredients provides a new way of judging any chef's sensibilities, so too is the execution and presentation of the breakfast dishes. As any chef at home knows only too well, no meal can be more challenging than simultaneously stirring the porridge, boiling eggs, squeezing the oranges, making coffee and tea and not burning the toast.

A combination of jet lag, sun in the early mornings and an insider tip from friends led us to breakfasts at Untitled in the Whitney Museum on 75th Street down to Locanda Verde in Tribeca on the Lower West Side with stops in between at Maialino, Balthazar in SoHo and Peels on Bowery (pictured above by Nick Johnson).

And while each was memorable for the food and the opportunity to observe New Yorkers at work and play, these restaurants all shared one common physical feature - big, tall windows - that are also to be found at some of my favourite

London breakfast haunts, such as Caravan, Cecconi's and The Wolseley. These windows, particularly if the pastry display is in a prime location, can certainly lure in undecided passers by.

This is one reason breakfast in the café section of Locanda Verde has grown so swiftly, according to pastry chef Karen DeMasco, whose muffins are not too sweet even for my European palate. 'I love how the whole place smells like freshly baked pastries as we set up in the morning and how people almost freak out when you walk through the dining room with piping hot doughnuts', she explained with unbounded enthusiasm.

DeMasco's pastries were an excellent foil for the more pungent uova Modenese, two poached eggs with cotechino hash, spinach and tomato hollandaise that followed. Breakfast at Untitled was distinguished by cheesy scrambled eggs on sourdough with grits and Stumptown Roasters coffee, Maialino by my wife's regular order of their toffee glazed brioche and mine of granola with vincotto, a thick, sweet grape syrup from Apulia, southern Italy.

Peels, opened last year by Taavo Somer and William Tigertt, and in a two-storey building on a corner site that attracts plenty of natural light, can serve 200 breakfasts on a busy morning. Everything that came out of the pastry section and kitchen was first class and we particularly enjoyed their 'build a biscuit' section, where you choose the toppings for this southern delicacy. As a result, our working day got off to a cracking start.

Balthazar www.balthazarny.com
Locanda Verde www.locandaverdenyc.com
Maialino www.maialinonyc.com
Peels www.peelsnyc.com
Untitled www.untitledatthewhitney.com