New York's vital ingredient

24 Nov 2011 by Nick Lander/FT

Joe Bastianich, with whom chef Mario Batali has opened over 20 restaurants in New York, Las Vegas and Singapore – and they now have their sights set on opening in Hong Kong – was in typically feisty mood after lunch at Esca, their seafood restaurant on W 43rd Street.

'I still believe New York is the dining capital of the world, that you can get the best of whatever style of food you want to eat here. It's like London but with a permanent 50% discount on the prices', he enthused.

Now I have long remained sceptical about the extent of the actual price differential between these two cities, as London's prices have to include the sales tax, and the service charge is invariably lower than the 20% anticipated in New York. But the inherent value offered by any restaurant can only be a reflection of the quality on offer, and regrettably my first three evenings in New York ended disappointingly.

While the wine list, and wine service under Rubén Sanz Ramiro, at **Veritas** continue to impress, its kitchen singularly underperformed, most notably with an under-seasoned roast chicken dish and a far too sweet concoction from the pastry section.

Dinner the following night, at **La Promenade des Anglais**, a Niçois restaurant that French chef Alain Allegretti has opened on W 26th Street between 8th and 9th, got off to a good start with some excellent appetisers: burrata; fried gnocchi and zucchini; and a delicious bottle of Austrian Meinhard Forstreiter's 2010 Grüner Veltliner ($42). But then everything got sloppy as the dishes that followed lost their precision and flavour. There is no need for such a large menu for a style of cooking where the freshness of what is in the market that day is the most essential ingredient.

Despite the torrential rain, we ran into **La Mar** on Madison Park with unbridled enthusiasm, keen not just to learn about the Peruvian ingredients on its menu but also to see how its new owners have transformed what used to be Tabla, a favourite Indian restaurant.

Sadly, they do not seem to have taken their customers into account. This is a difficult space over two floors, with the kitchens inconveniently on the first floor, and a large opening in the floor in between. The ease with which the buzz of a busy restaurant can reverberate has now been amplified by the removal of all the previous restaurant's soft furnishings. Everything and everywhere seems hard, metallic and deafening.

Nor do the new owners seem to have reconciled the style of service they want to give. They are accepting large tables that generate a lot of noise but then instruct their waiters to describe every single ingredient on each dish as though in an intimate dining room, instructions that become virtually impossible to follow in the ensuing din. The ceviche, the marinated raw fish dishes, were good but the dish of whipped potatoes with different toppings and the rice and shrimp dish were disappointing, and certainly not worth the headache that we walked away with.

Two days later, my spirits and faith in New York's restaurants were restored by quick trips to old favourites. The first involved a yellowfin tuna burger (a key ingredient is the ginger mustard glaze) while sitting at the bar of **Union Square Café** as it celebrated its 26th birthday and then the goats' cheese tortellini at Otto, a Batali/Bastianich co-production by Washington Square. These two restaurants continue to exude the city's energy and their owners' clear vision for them.

This energy, a vital ingredient in any successful restaurant, was matched if not surpassed by trips to Roberta's in Brooklyn and Daniel on E 65th street.

Roberta's involved a trip on the L line to Morgan Avenue and a 100-metre walk from the subway into a poorly lit street where a caravan was selling vintage clothes for US$10 each. (Photos above and below courtesy of Anthony Falco.) The restaurant has a breeze-block frontage and a green curtain across the front door which opens up onto such a scene of colour and exuberance that I felt as though I was walking into a speakeasy in Chicago in the 1920s.

There is a flurry of activity around the red pizza oven in the immediate corner; a packed bar at the far end; and in the centre a series of wooden tables and benches that are more comfortable than they look. All the other customers seemed to be half my age with more than twice my hair.

But the food and wine list that Carlo Mirarchi delivers in a building that was originally a car mechanic's workshop but now has a vegetable garden and bread oven attached is sensationally good. A particularly intense, and equally well-dressed, salad of squashes from their own plot; crisp sweetbreads with lime and aioli; a carpaccio of beef as good as any; and very moreish pizza. Great food and great fun.

Both these factors were prominent in a celebratory dinner at **Daniel** during my very first visit to this long-established pillar of the city's restaurant scene. It was well worth waiting for.

The meal in a room that has echoes of the dining room on an ocean liner contained several culinary highlights: a game consommé with foie gras tortellini; yellowfin tuna, cured, confit and as a tartare; squab pigeon with foie gras; and turbot, on the bone, with endive roasted and pureed. There were also the culinary tricks on either side of what the guest orders that are now part of a meal of such quality.

But what impressed me most was that this quality was being served to 250 customers on what I learnt was their busiest night of the year, a number I know no leading French chef in Paris or London would dare to match. Only, I realised, in New York.

Roberta's www.robertaspizza.com
Daniel www.danielnyc.com