

## Look back in hunger

1 Dec 2011 by Nick Lander/FT

It has been a year of eating excitingly, of memorable introductions interspersed with the odd, sad, farewell.

Over the course of a fortnight, I managed to experience my first meal at [Noma](#), Copenhagen, to taste René Redzepi's extraordinary approach to nature's bounty as well as my first glass of Danish wine. This was promptly followed by my final dinner at [El Bulli](#) in Spain, the memories of which haunted me six months later when I cooked dinner for [Ferran Adrià](#), its culinary genius, in our kitchen.

But as I have been looking back over all the restaurants I have reviewed this year, a particular aspect of the fascinating world of restaurants has become evident.

It has done so, as the best things so often do, from listening to my wife. She is the *FT*'s wine correspondent and she has long maintained that one of the particular attractions of looking at a bottle of wine on a shelf in a supermarket, where it is surrounded by so many other foodstuffs and household staples, is that nothing else will take you so directly and so immediately to the region in which it was made; often to the name of the village; and, in certain cases, to the individual who made it.

The parallel with restaurants is that I believe that there is nowhere so easily accessible that takes the consumer so directly into the personality of the individual who has created it, whether chef or restaurateur. It is this particular factor, the strength of the creator's personality, which now seems to distinguish those restaurants I find most appealing from the others. This will not only constitute an increasingly important ingredient in their prosperity, but will also be another major consideration for restaurateurs as they choose which kind of restaurant to open and where. As Danny Meyer, the celebrated New York restaurateur, explained, 'The challenge for me is to create somewhere that combines the excitement of going out, principally in the food and wine we serve, with the comfort factor of being welcomed and looked after as though you were in my own home.'

In London, Heston Blumenthal set the bar extremely high at the beginning of the year when he finally opened [Dinner](#) (right) in the Mandarin Oriental, Knightsbridge. Over the years, several British chefs have breathed new life into neglected, native recipes but here Blumenthal has achieved this within the setting of a hotel dining room that is light, bright, devoid of tablecloths and, most exceptionally, of stuffiness and pretension.

Lunch across the horseshoe-shaped counter at [Zeb](#) (*zuppa e bollito*) in Florence provided the opportunity to watch mother and son, Giuseppina and Alberto Navari, pace the interior, take orders, cook and open wine. The plates of ricotta-filled ravioli with a duck meat and orange sauce were equally exciting. Zeb is far less expensive than Dinner, obviously, but shares the same eye for quality and the same disdain for pretension.

Memories of this meal return whenever I dive into [Duck Soup](#) on Dean Street, Soho, London. Here too the bar, the few tables and the kitchen are in close proximity, as, invariably, are its owners, Clare Lattin, Julian Biggs and Rory McCoy. The old record player and the older collection of vinyl are, however, distinctly Duck Soup. Jackson Boxer has also demonstrated with the [Brunswick House Café](#), Vauxhall, just how a combination of style and wit, architecture and antiques, as well as well-priced good food, can compensate for a very small amount of working capital.

Southern and north-east Spain provided introductions to diverse but equally committed characters.

At [La Carboná](#) in Jerez it was the experience of being in a restaurant, once a sherry bodega, where husband and wife Javier and Ana Garcia so proudly serve what their highly talented son, Javier, is cooking. At [Villa Mas](#) (pictured above) on the Costa Brava it was meeting the exuberant Carlos Orta, chef and compiler of an extraordinary list of burgundies, and subsequently listening to him perform as a DJ until 3 am (we were staying very close by!)

What is so exciting about the new wave of Swedish cooking is not exemplified just by what Magnus Nilsson prepares from all that exists in the countryside and lakes around [Fäviken](#), northern Sweden, or by what Mikael Jönsson (left) is cooking at [Hedone](#) in Chiswick, west London. It is rather the commitment that seems to exist among Swedish chefs collectively to present their new style of Swedish cooking to the rest of the world. This was most recently demonstrated when Bjorn Frantzé and Daniel Lindeberg left their renowned Stockholm restaurant for 24 hours to cook alongside

Jonsson, whom, until the morning of the lunch, they had never met.

New York revealed three very different but equally dynamic characters on three very different occasions.

The first was a two-family Sunday brunch at [Red Rooster](#) up in Harlem, where chef Marcus Samuelsson has created a place that evokes history and a definite sense of place combined with excellent American food. The second was a two-family dinner at [Prune](#), where the pleasure of Gabrielle Hamilton's particular approach to cooking continued over the next few days as I read her enthralling autobiography, *Blood, Bones & Butter*. Finally, there was a memorable dinner at [Daniel](#) to celebrate a particular landmark in our family.

The most exceptional memories, however, still resonate from an overnight stay on [Inis Meáin](#) off the north east coast of Ireland in the lee of the Atlantic, where Ruairi and Marie Thérèse de Blácam have opened a restaurant with five elegant bedrooms. As we waited in the bus for the 8.15 am ferry, watching a fisherman unload scallops in the driving rain, a fellow traveller nervously asked Ruairi whether there are any days when the ferry doesn't operate. 'A few', he replied. 'But on those days you never want to leave the house!'