Soho by the Mediterranean

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The restaurant business harbours very few secrets.

Its sales prices are widely published via its menus and wine lists. The wholesale prices of any restaurant's main suppliers are invariably widely known to the competition, as are the general pay rates required to hire all the necessary staff. The emergence of www.wine-searcher.com now allows any customer to check on the prices the restaurateur is paying for any specific wine, while the volume of rubbish sacks awaiting collection on the pavement at the end of the evening provides a very direct indication of the level of sales.

While researching my book *The Art of the Restaurateur*, which Phaidon will publish in the autumn, I had come to realise, however, that there is still one particular area that continues to be dealt with in the utmost secrecy: how restaurateurs meet, put to the test, and hire a potential new chef.

This situation can be extremely awkward because if the restaurateur appears too frequently at the proposed chef's current restaurant, this will alert his or her current employer. Bringing a stranger into the proposed new restaurant will equally unnerve the current chef.

Sam and Eddie Hart have finally lured away the Scottish chef Jeremy Lee, after 16 years behind the stoves at the Blue Print Café above the Design Museum, to become their chef/partner at Quo Vadis, Soho, but their secret meetings to plan this were rumbled on every occasion.

These assignations included a lunch near Quo Vadis, after which I bumped into Lee cycling the wrong way down Dean Street; on the Eurostar to Paris, where they were spotted by another London chef; and over a furtive dinner in Spitalfields, where they bumped into another journalist.

Lee's transfer from the south bank of the Thames to Soho finally took place over the Christmas period when the restaurant was closed and the renovations took place. The design changes that Lee's arrival has initiated are immediately obvious.

The former dark reception desk has been replaced by something much less imposing. The wooden table on the other side is currently decorated with loaves of bread; a large basket of Seville oranges; a bowl of thick-skinned Amalfi lemons; and a tray of clementines. Welcome to Soho by the Mediterranean, it shouts.

Inside the first room that serves as the bar, the ageless Jon Spiteri is on hand wearing the round glasses, thick-stripe suits and winkle-picker shoes that he has worn in every restaurant he has worked in from St John in the 1990s to here. The walls have now been painted white; the paintings removed; and the lighting made much more flattering.

Cleverly, as this is Soho, what is on offer in the bar gets the Lee treatment, too. There is an appetising cocktail of Campari, pomegranate and orange juice; three different sherries; a broad range of *manchets*, a French yeast bread (small enough for the hand) topped with smoked mackerel, anchovy and potted beef; and bar food that encompasses dishes such as baked salsify with parmesan and a smoked eel and horseradish sandwich. These are dishes that are not too complicated, that could be cooked at home but are even better when left to a consummate professional.

But it is in the restaurant, replete with tablecloths and napkins but devoid of a cover charge, where the fun really begins as soon as the new menu arrives, already a frontrunner in the annual competition I would like to initiate for 'Menu Design of the Year'.

It is an A4 card, printed daily, with that day's weather forecast in the top-right-hand corner. Around the central main menu for the day are 10 boxes that contain certain groupings of dishes: 'bites', including a smooth bloater paste, similar in texture to a kipper pate; two types of oysters; three cuts of beef and a rack of lamb from the grill; and a pie of the day, a rich, hare pie topped with puff pastry.

The central section comprises that day's five starters and four main courses which appear under a couple of wistful black-and-white illustrations by John Broadley. Those on the main menu include a black-and-white stove and a rather

glum cat on a chair. Those on the separate dessert card are more louche: playing cards, a guitar, and a stylish young man with a cigarette between his lips.

Lee has settled immediately into a culinary groove. A smoked haddock and potato broth was heartening. while the long, pale green stems of sea kale elegantly graced the white plate alongside a rich, butter sauce. Adam Tihany, the New York restaurant designer, was so impressed with the mackerel he was served, grilled whole alongside a cucumber and dill salad, that he promptly sent me his photograph of it.

There is the same intelligence, technique and deftness of touch behind each day's pudding menu, which includes lemon posset and rhubarb; walnut meringue and quinces; and a small tower of three pieces of shortcake separated by a mixture of goat's curd, lemon curd and marmalade that brought our meal to a sweet, tangy and very happy conclusion.

In hiring Lee, the Harts seem finally to have addressed the major challenge they inherited when they took over Quo Vadis three years ago: that, like many venerable restaurants, it conveyed too formal, too smart connotations for its immediate location. It is now as lively as the rest of Soho with a style of cooking that is exciting, vibrant and fresh. Those secret liaisons have proved most fruitful.

Quo Vadis, www.quovadissoho.co.uk