

## By their light bulbs shall ye know them

8 Apr 2012 by Gareth Tilley

See our new [guide to all readers' restaurant reviews](#).

*This is the first of our weekly restaurant reviews written by a guest columnist standing in for Nick while he recovers from surgery (more details [here](#)).*

Recommend a man a restaurant and he'll eat well for a day; but teach him how to find a good restaurant and he'll eat well for ever. [And probably women too - chippy JR]

Well may we lament the temporary interruption in service from Nick Lander, which just goes to show how much some of us have come to depend on his reviews to find reliably great food not just in London but around the world. To help us stand on our own two feet until his return I've chosen not to recommend a particular restaurant, but instead to throw my hat in the ring with a few choice tips about how to pick a good restaurant 'flying blind', as it were.

Telling a good restaurant from a bad one used to be really easy - avoid the empty ones and run a mile from anyone spruiking\* on the doorstep of their restaurant offering a free bottle of wine 'just for you'.

But in this day and age, when queuing around the block to eat food served on a battered army surplus tin tray from the back of a van (**Pitt Cue Co**) is suddenly something to be sought after rather than avoided, it's time to reassess what's a helpful pointer and what's not.

So here are my suggestions for when you are next put on the spot.

### 1. Study the menu

I don't mean study what's on the menu, I mean study the object itself. Avoid any restaurant where the menu appears built to last. Run a mile from anything laminated or specially printed on wipeable cardboard. This shows the restaurant runs the same menu day in day out, year in year out. Which in turn means they aren't inspired to cook seasonally or even vary what they cook when inspiration strikes. On the other hand, any restaurant with the date printed on the menu, in a binder in which the pages can easily be replaced, or even just written in chalk on the wall, is worth a try. Counter-intuitively, somewhere that simply scrawls the menu in biro on the back of an envelope for each service - such as at [Duck Soup in Soho](#) (London) - may well be the place serving the most exciting, fresh and creative food on the block.

### 2. Read the menu

If you have not already dismissed the restaurant on the basis of its menu as an object, then you might be forced to do so after reading it. Like architecture, menu writing ranges from the brutalist to the baroque. 'Goat's curd, sea purslane, radish. 8' reads like some sort of bizarre bingo calling, or perhaps a type of military code. On the other hand 'panastrelle of walnut farstada shrouded in a pipalette of damask quombien' could just as well be a choreographer's instructions for a complicated dance move for all it tells the unsuspecting diner. Both are, however, preferable to any menu description that engages in any form of self praise. Terms like 'meltingly tender' or 'irresistible' do not feature on the menus of good restaurants. Never go somewhere that proclaims a steak as 'cooked to perfection'. You should be the judge of that, not them.

### 3. Shabby is the new chic

Having decided that the menu is a danger-free zone, you need to decide whether there is anything in the decor of the restaurant that will betray something in the cooking. Although most people will have some sense of intuition here (white napkins folded in rectangles - good; pink napkins folded as fans - bad), all is not what it seems. Some restaurants are designed to look decrepit when they open. Others are just decrepit. Being able to tell the difference between a designer-chipped formica table that cost £8,000 and a chipped formica table that's been there for 50 years is an important skill worth developing. A place with the former is probably some trendy take on a 1950s diner which, despite its cringeworthy decor, probably has some keen-bean chef in the kitchen who sources local organic vegetables and stocks

Sipsmith's Gin (eg **Mishkin's**, Covent Garden). The latter has probably never cleaned its coffee machine. It drives me to distraction that some good restaurateurs feel the need to deliberately shabbyfy their restaurants (and that other good restaurateurs refuse to de-shabbyfy theirs - a much less prevalent problem), but it's possible to miss out on a lot of good food out there by dismissing these places at face value.

#### 4. *Excuse me, do you work here?*

In a similar vein, don't be put off by the way the staff look, if indeed you can tell they are the staff. Quality lies in the extremes. Elaborate, pressed uniform? Fine, you're probably in some Michelin-recommended restaurant with aspirations to fine dining. It might be stiff, but at least you're safe. No uniform? Even better - they're probably going for the grungy look and there might actually be something interesting on the menu (this is often combined with menus featuring that old typewriter font but probably designed and printed on a Mac in the back office - see point 1 above). Clip on bow tie with short sleeved blue shirt? Forget it. And hand the waiter back his laminated menu on which the ink is beginning to stick to the plastic.

And if all else fails...

#### 5. *By their light bulbs shall ye know them*

'There's a new restaurant opened up down the road - they have those light bulbs that you like.' These words were recently used to persuade me to eat at some new restaurant or other. They were met with a blank face. I can't say I'd ever noticed the light bulbs in any particular restaurant, but upon having it pointed out to me, it turns out that a staggering number of good restaurants, particularly new ones, have what I now know to be 'squirrel cage filament' light bulbs as part of their interior design (pictured), or something similarly flash. (**Polpo** even features them on its [website](#), its sister establishment **Spuntino**, **Wright Brothers** and even **The Wolseley**). They must be the Riedel of light bulbs (or possibly, to stay ahead of the curve, the Baccarat of light bulbs, as Richard Hemming tells us [here](#)). Not a necessary sign of a good restaurant, but apparently a sufficient one. I've never had a bad meal in a restaurant with cool light bulbs. Just to check the theory, the last time I noticed fancy light bulbs through a restaurant window I rushed home and Googled the place in question. It was **Dabbous**, the place that everyone in the food press has been going ape over for the last few months. Indeed so attractive are their light bulbs that the earliest reservation I could get was for August. I'll let you know how it was.

\*Australian word for touting