New York - how to win repeat bookings

20 Apr 2012 by Andrew McKinna

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It was an accident waiting to happen, I suppose, but it caught the three of us by surprise, right at the outset of a recent long weekend in Manhattan, while we were still absorbing the deceptively simple two-page menu open in front of us. The first glass of a Grüner Veltliner had succeeded in tickling our taste buds and Pam, our friend from Boston, was starting to relax after her journey.

We were chattering away, pausing to admire the lighting and overall interior design when, almost in slow motion, our bottle of wine was knocked over. A tall Manhattan lawyer, striding in to join her colleagues at the adjacent table, had pivoted to apologise to them for being late as she walked past us, oblivious to how far back the stern of her ridiculously long designer handbag protruded.

Pam immediately jumped up to avoid being covered in wine - and the lawyer must have sensed the movement and commotion. She turned around briefly in acknowledgement, sort of - 'I'm sorry, did I do that?' - before taking her seat, with her back to us, so she did not witness the remarkably swift and professional reaction from several different members of the restaurant's exemplary staff.

First to respond, in a couple of seconds, was our captain, a title which somehow always makes an Englishman of a certain age like me inwardly smile and start humming the Eagles' 'Hotel California', but who completely merited that title for the way she took control, calmly and efficiently - sweeping the fallen bottle up in one hand from the table while discreetly pointing out to her two colleagues arriving from behind the scenes with cloths and a mop exactly where the wine now lay in a pool on the floor.

Reassuring us that she would replace that bottle immediately, she slipped away, and in her place arrived the manager, who quietly offered Pam an envelope, 'to cover your dry cleaning bill'. Pam declined, because the wine had completely missed her, but he did not leave until he was satisfied that she was not simply being polite. The replacement bottle arrived seconds later, complete with fresh glasses of course, and, less than five minutes after the lawyer made her dramatic entrance, we resumed our attempt to work out what to eat.

While Judith and Pam flipped backwards and forwards between the tasting menu and the à la carte options, I explained why I had chosen **Craft** from all the other restaurants in New York. We always try to balance a return to old favourites with new adventures - and I had been determined to find somewhere that was distinctive, ideally Modern American.

Farm to market to table - or 'greenmarket' - is a keynote of many contemporary American restaurants but, when I saw interior photos of Craft online, I felt I had found a winner. Not just Modern American but quintessentially Manhattan. Rather as we appreciate terroir in wines, along with many fellow Purple Pagers, so also we seek authenticity and character when selecting where to dine.

Our captain was never far away - but appeared at our side only when we looked a though we had a question or, when she saw how thirsty we were, to offer what remained of the first bottle, as miraculously almost 40% had survived the crash. And we certainly peppered her with questions - notably about the à la carte portion sizes, while we set about assembling our own tasting menu, rather than simply accepting the printed version.

The three of us have healthy appetites and were in the mood to try as many different dishes as possible, without appearing embarrassingly greedy. On principle our aim would be to finish every plate between us. She offered straightforward guidance on each of our selections and, based on our shortlist, suggested two individual small plates each, sampling fresh seafood and shellfish, pasta and two family-style platters of fish and chicken to share afterwards. What defined the experience was the time she took to answer each question. We did not feel rushed at any stage.

Just how challenging the process of choosing where to book can be was underlined a couple of nights later at **La Petite Maison**, which on paper looked equally promising, but which ultimately failed to deliver. Nine times out of ten we start by reading reviews from professional critics whose judgement we trust - that's why we are emphatically fans of Nick's weekly

column as much as anything else posted by Jancis and the rest of the team on this website.

Occasionally, however, the combination of location and logistics, as well as the style of food and choices available on the menu, overcome our more adventurous instincts and, in this case, the five-minute walk from our hotel, and the fact that half of the group are on various no/low carb diets, plus the odd gluten-free allergy and a shared passion for France, convinced us to take what looked like a perfectly sensible Mediterranean option, with a table for eight luckily available on a Saturday night.

The contrast between a wonderful evening at Craft and a disappointing experience at La Petite Maison made me try to understand exactly what had made the difference. The quality and presentation of the food was certainly comparable, if stylistically different. The kitchen at La Petite Maison delivered a succession of first-class plates that lived up to our expectations, with extremely fresh carpaccio of tuna, and plump scallops, a highlight, although truffle risotto was like glue.

The wine list however was short to the point of terse - and made my eyes water. Although we managed to find a couple of bottles from Italy, a reasonably food-friendly Pinot Grigio and Nebbiolo, both under $75, the average price of a bottle accelerated very quickly to several hundreds of dollars - raising eyebrows from one of our friends who, until that point, had hoped it might make an interesting alternative for occasional business lunches, because it was a short walk from his office in Manhattan.

With hindsight, however, minor mistakes from the moment we arrived defined the difference between our two experiences. The team at Craft welcomed us professionally and took us straight to an excellent table. At La Petite Maison, they bluffed their way through the fact that they could not find our reservation, or had already given our table away to another group, perhaps walk-ins on what was the tail-end of St Patrick's Day, and so we all stood and watched while they combined two tables of four.

I appreciate that such mistakes can happen anywhere - but it is worth explaining that both reservations were made online, and both were confirmed by the restaurant a couple of days beforehand by a call to my mobile telephone number. So, for example, confusion over the name the table was booked under should not be possible in such circumstances. While we naturally tend to focus more on the quality of the food and wine, and do enjoy a healthy debate with a sommelier, I confess that perhaps sometimes we take excellent service too much for granted. Actually, this reminded me that it makes all the difference.

A variety of waitresses, imported from France to lend authenticity, would approach us to offer water, bread and menus - but a complete lack of co-ordination was exemplified by the way in which it took 10 minutes between the placing of our order and a message to return from the kitchen that a potentially exciting starter of courgette flowers was not available. This in turn made us notice the waiting staff had been parachuted in and, if they did not lack confidence - and, in a couple of cases, charm - then presumably it must be their training and supervision that was at fault.

Whereas our Captain at Craft had made us feel her focus was only on us, the waitresses at La Petite Maison were always looking somewhere else - and the manager seemed more interested in the succession of impossibly tall ladies walking in and downstairs to the second, and perhaps slightly more chic, section of the restaurant. Both the captain and manager at Craft had displayed detailed knowledge of both the menu and the wine list - and had made intelligent suggestions. We did not even bother to ask anyone at La Petite Maison. A comparison of the cost per head for both evenings was instructive.

Excluding service, because we understandably left a rather more generous tip at Craft than at La Petite Maison, the prices worked out very to be similar. Value for money? We certainly felt we had a memorable experience at Craft and would recommend the restaurant to anyone looking for ideas in Manhattan. La Petite Maison, unlike its London outpost, which is adored by several good friends of ours, has unfortunately been crossed off our list. Win some, lose some, I suppose.

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