Bocuse - best in the world?

27 Apr 2012 by Richard Neville

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When we lived in a house in England we were proud owners of a rather splendid semi-industrial Paul Bocuse cooker with gas rings over one oven and graded hotplate over a second.

A few years later, when living on a barge (shown above in the Languedoc where the Nevilles' journey ended - see Languedoc v Catalunya), there was no way we could we float past the mooring pontoon at Kilometre Point PK 12.2 on the river Saône. This may not mean much to most readers but it is right in front of the great man's restaurant, modestly named Paul Bocuse.

The menu outside revealed, unfortunately, that they served no low-priced midweek lunchtime menu. A la main courses ranged between 42 euros and 79 euros (it was a few years ago), and a couple of four-course menus were on offer, one at 105 euros, and the other 150 euros. Rather expensive for us but, on returning to the boat, we decided not to let the experience and all the future memories that a meal here would evoke, slip by. We agreed on the 105 euros menu, both of us choosing lobster and then pigeon. They had a table.

We were expecting the ultimate eating experience, absolute perfection. Was it?

Let's start from the beginning. The site for the restaurant is not perfect, next to a railway line and on the wrong side of a busy road from the river, of which it has no view. Its exterior was painted with of a picture of the great chef looking out of a window amongst old-fashioned puddings, but was it just that bit naff? None of this should detract from the quality of food on plate, yet somehow it does depreciate the whole experience. It drops a perfection point or two in your brain.

On entry the staff were numerous and attentive, and even led us to the toilets in order to wash our hands. As expected, these were large rooms with automatic taps and large towels that you toss in a basket after use. The dining room was as luxurious and comfortable as one would expect, but a little old fashioned. So was the tableware, the plates overtly decorated and, along with the cutlery and glasses, emblazoned with Paul Bocuse motifs. Several small side tables sat in the centre of the room; what were these for?

There were plenty of staff to provide a superb service, but generally they seemed just a little disinterested, not exactly off-hand but distant, not looking at you when they replied to a question rather abruptly. A second perfection point dropped.

The menus arrived. The cheapest had risen in price to 110 euros in half an hour! Then we noticed that the pigeon main course we wanted was not on it, and the lobster starter was different; the menu displayed outside was not the one inside. A third perfection point dropped.

Menu Classique (110 euros)

Dodine de canard à l'ancienne truffée et pistaché et foie gras de canard maison

ou Velouté de homard armoricaine

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Loup en croûte feuilletée (à partir de 2 persons)

Ou Côte de veau rotie en cocotte, garniture bourgeoise (à partir de 2 persons)

Ou Fricassé de volaille de Bresse a la crème aux morilles

ou Rognons de veau poelés, sauce madère

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Selection de fromages frais et affinés "Mêre Richard"

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Délices et gourmandises

Petits fours et chocolates

The wine list was a formidable document, good if you know exactly what you want for they may well have it, if French, but too big for serious consideration without the help of a sommelier. They had overcome this by printing a small selection of wines with the menu, and employing a sommelier of course. We like sommeliers, for here is someone who should know each wine as intimately as the dishes on the menus.

I tried to get him to recommend a wine that would accompany our chosen dishes well, but he gave an unhelpful reply even before we could tell him which price menu we had chosen, let alone the dishes we were thinking of ordering. A fourth perfection point dropped.

We decided on a local wine, a Condrieu. There was a large choice, so we consulted the sommelier again: 'These are fruity in style and this one is toasty,' was his response, without offering his opinion of which style would accompany our dishes better. We chose the toasty one - Condrieu La Loye 2002 from Jean Michel Gerin at 55 euros for 50cl. The opening and tasting ceremony revealed an excellent Condrieu, very floral with violets predominating, but not at all toasty. A fifth perfection point dropped.

A wonderful little *amuse-bouche* arrived, a velouté of petits pois. Perfection, singing with the flavour of fresh young peas, served in a coffee cup with a little cream and a pea floating on top; the first, and the last, vegetable we would see. They obviously do not expect vegetarians to dine there, unless they are satisfied with a melon entrée, cheese and dessert.

The velouté of lobster made us blink; it was a murky, brownish, frothy liquid in a soup bowl hiding pieces of lobster within, no attempt at decoration or artistic presentation. But it tasted excellent and was very rich, so rich in fact that we both felt pretty full by the end.

Then the waiters brought a couple of side tables up to ours, and with lots of ceremony another waiter arrived with a tray carrying a puff pastry fish, about 40cm long, decoratively shaped with head, tail, fins and scales, and placed it on one of the tables. With much flourish, the head waiter removed the pastry fish head and set it to one side, upside down, followed by sections of the pastry from over its body, revealing the flesh of the Loup underneath. He quickly took the flesh off the bone, but rather too quickly as he included some bones with the flesh. A sixth perfection point dropped. A second waiter plated the fish on the other side table, adding spoonfuls of the shellfish mousse with which the loup had been stuffed, and then covered it all with a shellfish flavoured Béarnaise sauce before topping it with the reserved pastry pieces.

It was flavoursome, with perfectly cooked pastry and fish, and the portions were huge. But it was very rich again and the mousse tasted too similar to our first course. This is unfortunate as I would expect that most dining couples want to buy only one bottle of wine and would start by selecting a white to accompany the fish main course. They would then choose a starter that would go with this wine and expect the starter to be somewhat different in character to the main course. A seventh perfection point dropped.

More re-arrangement of the side tables for the cheese trays but we really did not need any. Fortunately, I had noticed that other tables had been offered fromage blanc as well. I had to ask for it. An eighth perfection point lost. It was excellent, served with thick fresh cream.

A little extra appeared, a crême brulée flavoured with cinnamon.

Then the grande finale, the dessert performance. A flurry of activity as many side tables were brought up, onto which waiters placed a range of old-fashioned style puddings, at least a dozen, most suitable for someone who had not eaten for a week. Unfortunately two desserts that I might have chosen, cherry clafoutis and apricot tart, were not brought from the kitchen to the table until after I had made my choice and been served. Maybe the waiter was in a hurry to get home. A

ninth perfection point dropped. However, the chocolate covered gateau, pistachio ice cream and fresh strawberries and raspberries were tasty.

I can eat a lot and had never so far been defeated. This was the first time, for the heavy-looking pastry, chocolate and sponge based petits fours seemed a step too far.

So what is my verdict? In restaurants I like to choose dishes that contain a lot of expertise from the chef, not ones that we can cook just as well ourselves at home or easily purchase in shops, such as cheese. I also like specialities that are difficult to obtain elsewhere. Hence we were particularly pleased with the loup en croute and some of the desserts.

We like menus that build in a theme, as Italian meals do, and not change radically with completely different courses. But the richness of the lobster starter was equivalent to the fish that followed, making the meal rather rich and gross.

Paul Bocuse was reflecting food as it used to be, but I cannot make up my mind whether this is a deliberate attempt at turning back the clock, or whether it is just passé. Whichever, it was theatre, a performance in the dining room where trays and side tables have replaced trolleys or waiters placing artistically arranged plates in front of you. At one point we thought that we really were at a circus performance as a barrel organ was wheeled to an adjacent table for a birthday tune, followed by hearty clapping from the staff and a very embarrassed customer. Rather undignified?

'Yes' to the experience of eating at Paul Bocuse.

'Yes' to the quality of cooking.

'A wee bit suspect' to the performance.

'Maybe' to the menu.

'No' to the price.

Linda's comment afterwards was 'Why pay all that to get indigestion?'

When we sold wine, we found that many customers would buy only bottles with a known name. We called them 'label drinkers' and however much we tried, they did not want to listen when we suggested alternatives that were better and cheaper but unknown. At these restaurant prices, I feel that Paul Bocuse was likewise cashing in on the equivalent of label drinkers.

However, despite its lack of perfection, the memory of this meal lives on favourably in my memory today.