

A new restaurant near Cairanne

26 May 2012 by Jonathan Bates

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When I started this review it was going to be about Frances Mallman's 1884 restaurant at the Escorihuela winery in Mendoza, Argentina, the place where I enjoyed the most succulent chicken I've ever tasted and the most exciting prawns, too. Which came as a surprise, given that I went there for the steaks for which Mallman is rightly celebrated and the long list of Malbecs. But that review must wait.

Because when a waiter greets your choice of a wine with the words, 'You lucky bastard, that's my last bottle' (I translate roughly from the French), you know you're eating somewhere rather special.

Of course, you don't have to be an expert on the wines of the southern Rhône to choose a bottle from Domaine Gourt de Mautens at Rasteau. It is well known enough now for people to pay the relatively high prices that are charged for these round, spicy, powerful reds. Or the vin doux naturel. But this was a dry white.

'Only a thousand bottles. *Mille bouteilles*. I received just one case. And this is the last bottle.' I had last visited the Restaurant Coteaux et Fourchettes, which lies on a crossroads roughly equidistant from Cairanne, Rasteau and Vacqueyras, two years earlier. Then it had been open for just four days and I had found it by chance, driving back to our *gîte* late one evening and spotting the lights and the cars, then returning the following day. It had been good, was my memory. Very good.

Now we were back. To a cool, understated room, of beiges and pale grey tones, never originally planned as a restaurant but making a very good pass at being one. There's a caveau alongside, selling a range of wines from the restaurant's list, at producer's prices, and a terrace at the front that always looks either far too hot or too wind-blown to use.

There are essentially two menus: Coteaux and Fouchette. Coteaux is cheaper. I would have been happy to eat either; both were populated with dishes that fell in to the 'Oh yes, I'd like to try that' category. Fouchette won out, because among its choices were goat - and I enjoy goat when I get the chance. I wonder why you don't often see it in UK restaurants? Now I come to think of it, Francis Mallman does a pretty good goat at his restaurant in Mendoza...

Before the goat (which came four ways, each of which was good, and looked as pretty as a picture on its plate), there was a wonderful timbale of seasonal vegetables with lobster, with the vegetables served as a macedoine, mixed with succulent pieces of lobster. That worked pretty well too. And afterwards there was a collection of variants around red fruits which included a rosy macaroon so gooey that I'd have happily taken a box of them home.

And the wine? Silky and smooth, the Gourt de Mautens white was distinctly Rhône in its flavours but more like a fine Montrachet in its roundness, subtlety and length. It was one of those wines that just seems to find its way into every part of your mouth and then start opening out. It was a pretty good match for that rather exceptional goat.

This is a good restaurant. I'll be back. Soon, I hope.

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