

## It's not just what's on the plate

26 May 2012 by Hannah Watt

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With great food comes great responsibility to deliver a complete experience, and while the food may be the most important factor, it's not enough in isolation. And I'm not just talking about service, I mean ambiance - the whole package needs to be there to truly wow.

For me, a significant component of the pleasure to be derived from eating out is the right ambiance; somewhere that wraps me up in a warm haze of satisfaction and leaves me thinking I wouldn't change a thing. On walking into a restaurant I want my spirits to lift in anticipation that I'm in for a good time. Bad ambiance can quickly throw me into a slump that it's hard to recover from, regardless of how good the food turns out to be. The restaurant has to make the effort to engage me, otherwise, I struggle to engage with it.

One would think that creating the right ambiance should be relatively straightforward for a restaurant, provided it's got a clear vision of what it's aiming to achieve. However, ambiance isn't easily definable. A whole combination of factors come into play - lighting, music, decor, temperature, furniture, layout, service, and many more, which all need to meld together in just the right recipe to complement the food being served. It's not something that can be manufactured formulaically - it must be intuitively divined with reference to the individual specifics of the restaurant.

A memorable example where ambiance was sadly lacking was a visit to **Le Champignon Sauvage** in Cheltenham. There were high expectations, and a special weekend had been planned around eating there. Now I'm sure the food was absolutely lovely, but I don't really remember it. What I remember is the feel of the place; the cramped waiting room-esque lobby where we were sat for pre-dinner drinks, the pub-style light wooden wall panelling, and the awkward arrangement of the square dining room with stiff high-backed chairs, a random selection of garish incoherent artwork and overly bright lighting. Was this intentionally conceived or had they simply not gotten around to decorating for the last 25 years?

It just felt all wrong; a throwback at odds with the inspirational nature of the gastronomic creations. Rather than focusing on the food in front of me and gasping with delight, I was aghast at the assault on my senses coming from the environment around me. With fine dining in particular, you expect something extra special that delivers on all levels. In my book, misreading or neglecting the requisite ambiance is unforgivable.

Another experience at the other end of the gastronomic spectrum was a trip to the new Hunanese restaurant **Yipin China** in Angel, London N1, following up on some good reviews. Seated at the clunky, too-small table with fairy lights blinking in the window and a draft gusting from the doorway, with what sounded like failed Eurovision Song Contest entries blaring from the tinny stereo on the window sill, I was not feeling the love for the place. The food turned out to be a bit hit and miss as well: some of it superb, some of it less so. Had they got the ambiance right, or even nearly right, I could have forgiven quite a lot. Instead, each dish that didn't quite work, or wasn't exactly what was ordered, compounded the existing discomfort, leaving me aching for the meal to be over.

In contrast, there's certainly no lack of attention to ambiance at **La Bodega Negra's** downstairs restaurant. It's very nearly trying too hard, but definitely on the right track, and it's impossible not to be swept up in a bubble of infectious hedonism. Accessed speakeasy style through the faux sex shop frontage (above left), it's reassuring to be immediately greeted and have someone there to take your coat and show you downstairs. You can hear the buzz before stepping into the softly glowing cellar pulsing with drinkers and diners, giving you the satisfying feeling that you've just arrived at the best party in town as you weave through the tables to your seats.

With margaritas flowing and sizzling platters and racks of tacos being delivered left, right and centre, it's a hive of activity, and draws a fascinating crowd - who knows who might be cloistered in one of the booths? This is a frenetic, fun-fuelled environment reflected in an eclectic mix of consistently upbeat music. As a new venue, it's still fine tuning, and there were a couple of occasions where the lighting was dimmed a little too much, then corrected (there was a risk of returning from

a trip to the bathroom and sidling up to the wrong companion). And whoever was in control of the music had a few contrary moments - sometimes they'd get halfway through a track and decide, actually, no, they'd prefer something else, before changing their mind again. But this all seemed delightfully entertaining, as if arriving on the first night of some new avant-garde improvised cabaret show, with an exciting undercurrent where anything could happen. When you leave already planning the next visit, it's definitely gone well.

**Public House** in Islington has also become a firm favourite, in large part due to its seemingly instinctive self-awareness and joie de vivre. It has an ability to perfectly pitch itself and set a mood that feels both relaxing and decadent. On arrival, you're quickly poured a glass of water which is kept topped up throughout the evening. This is a nice touch, generally considered standard service in American bars and restaurants, but rare in the UK. The regularly evolving 'fancy drinks' menu features innovative cocktails as suggested aperitifs and digestifs, so even if you're not eating in the excellent restaurant, it's an ideal place to start or finish the night, and if you have the opportunity to get a stool at the bar then there's always some repartee on offer from the bartenders.

While the eccentric collection of furniture and almost pyromaniacal obsession with candles (see above right) could give the impression that you've stumbled into a gothic French *brocante* with its own fire hazard classification, it all contributes to the individual charm and quirkiness of the place. The staff are personable and attentive, and possess the engaging ability to convey the impression that they know you and are welcoming you into their own front room. This is one of those places which feels like a reunion with an old friend, and where you can be confident of a very satisfying evening.

So, in conclusion, *je ne sais quoi*, secret ingredient, that all good restaurants need and should strive for in order to properly fulfil their potential. Admittedly, responsibility for a diner's experience doesn't fall entirely onto the shoulders of the restaurant in question as there's an element of personal taste involved. But a customer shouldn't be left feeling let down if they've done their homework and have a reasonable idea of what to expect. Therefore, restaurateurs, you underestimate the power of *ambiance* at your peril! Get the food right and the punters will come. Get the *ambiance* right as well, and they will come back, again and again.

[Le Champignon Sauvage](#)

[Yipin China](#)

[La Bodega Negra](#)

[Public House](#)