Disappointment in Crissier

8 Aug 2012 by Nick Lander/FT

A generation ago, when the prospect of a career at the stoves was still a twinkle in the eye of those chefs now acclaimed as the world's best - Grant Achatz in the US, Heston Blumenthal in the UK and Denmark's René Redzepi - this particular distinction was unanimously bestowed upon Frédy Girardet.

Girardet's home was Crissier, an otherwise undistinguished suburb of Lausanne in Switzerland, where he reigned until 1997 before handing over to Philippe Rochat, his long-term right-hand man. Earlier this year, Rochat handed over the restaurant to Benoît Violier, who had fulfilled the same role for him. This recent change of command seemed a suitable pretext to return to the cumbersomely named Restaurant de l'Hôtel de Ville de Crissier.

As an aspiring restaurateur, I had once made the pilgrimage to eat chez Girardet and several strong impressions had remained. Most significantly, of just how good our dinner had been; of the rather incongruous decor that did not reveal the same aesthetic judgement as was evident on the plate; and of how those at the next table had, so temptingly, left behind a half-finished bottle of Château Latour.

Anticipating a hefty bill for dinner, we had booked into the modest Hotel Ibis in Crissier, a five-minute walk from the restaurant, but this brief journey only underlined the incongruity of the restaurant's location. To get there we trekked through a *zone industrielle*, home to Miele, Opel and Saab showrooms, so the appearance of a young man immaculate in dinner jacket and bow tie ready to open the restaurant's front door on to a small square now named after Girardet came as something of a surprise.

Inside, a smiling Madame Violier was there to introduce herself, to shake us by the hand and to hand us over to a young waiter to escort us to our table. In retrospect, I now realise that this was precisely when the initial disappointments of the evening began.

These culminated three hours later when I was presented with the bill for 886 Swiss Francs or £600 for three and the waiter quietly informed me that service was not included. Fortunately, our Swiss friend, who had guided us to three excellent Swiss wines, a 2011 single-vineyard Chasselas from Raymond Paccot, a 2009 Cornalin from Didier Joris and a 50cl late-harvest 2007 Marsanne made by Marie-Thérèse Chappaz, whispered that a five per cent tip would be sufficient. This was a small mercy.

By this time I had come to the inescapable conclusion that I had never eaten in a restaurant where so many different staff were on parade, an evidently important factor in such a high bill in a country where labour is so expensive. Unfortunately this generous staffing level was not that effective in looking after the customer.

We saw Madame Violier only at the beginning and the end of the meal. During the rest of the evening our dining room was under the management of a maître d' in a buttoned-up lounge suit who took our order, expertly carved the guinea fowl that was one of our main courses and sotto voce issued numerous instructions to his staff.

But he never once made any personal contact with us. Perhaps because he realised that we would never return, perhaps because we had ordered only Swiss wines rather than anything French and even more expensive, or perhaps because he didn't like the look of the small notebook by my side, he never once made us feel welcome and nor, surprisingly, at the end of the evening did he enquire whether we had had a good meal.

In fact, the only occasion he did speak to us was after he had carved the guinea fowl and placed it in the appropriate position next to the semi circle of macaroni on the plate. Then he took his iPhone out of his pocket and photographed his handiwork. Only when asked why he did this, did he explain that it was to show the kitchen how the finished dish looked before it was placed in front of the customer. So we were paying through the nose to form part of staff training!

This seemed to go to the heart of why this meal failed to live up to expectations or even the bill. Violier the chef has inherited this restaurant from another chef who in turn followed an indisputably great chef. The manner of that style of service, where the kitchen is overly important in the service yet the chef and his wife appear at the end of the meal to collect somewhat forced words of congratulation is symptomatic of a bygone era. There needs to be more dynamism in the exceptionally anodyne and crudely lit dining room and more attention given to the customer and everything they come

into contact with rather than the restaurant's own rhythms. The Venetian sommelier was a delightful and flexible exception to the rule but the wine glasses and wines other than from Bordeaux, Burgundy and Switzerland could certainly be improved, for example, and, as there is in so many top restaurants in France, there ought to be a better-value set menu.

One dish from the page dedicated to those created by Violier's predecessors, a whole *omble*, the freshwater fish from Lac Léman (Lake Geneva), was first class, and the cheese trolley is magnificent and its contents dispensed with generosity. But the heavily reduced sauces that accompanied the guinea fowl and the sweetbreads lacked freshness and any stimulating acidity while the accompanying vegetables were overworked, designed to impress the eyes rather than the taste buds. At £20, a dessert that comprised one scoop of vanilla ice cream and six strawberries was a particular disappointment, as were the over-sweet petits fours.

Not a meal to generate the happy memories of the one a generation ago.

Restaurant de l'Hôtel de Ville
1 rue d'Yverdon, 1023 Crissier
tel +41 21 634 05 05
www.restaurantcrissier.com