Beaugravi□re - paradise for wine (and truffle) lovers

23 Aug 2012 by Nick Lander/FT

We drove down the main street of Mondragon, an unremarkable town just north of Orange in France's Rhône Valley, in greedy anticipation of the combination of black truffles and extraordinary wine list that has enticed so many along this road over the past three decades.

As we emerged from the avenue of plane trees and turned into the car park of La Beaugravière, memories of our last dinner here over 25 years ago came flooding back.

The somewhat battered hotel sign (there are three simple but comfortable bedrooms above the restaurant); the sight of about 20 men and a solitary woman finishing their lunch in the dappled sunshine under the broad chestnut trees; all this and the gentleness of the overall picture combined to generate a sensation that here is a restaurant that has defied the march of time, fashion and, certainly on the part of its owners, Guy Jullien (pictured below), chef and obsessive wine collector, and his wife, Tina (whom he described as *la patronne*), of any thought of avarice.

In fact, as we settled down to dinner several hours later at one of these outdoor tables, it occurred to me that this is perhaps one of the few remaining restaurants in the whole of France that still resembles those that once inspired Elizabeth David, our greatest food writer, as she ate out across this country more than fifty years ago.

La Beaugravière has been run by the Julliens for the past 37 years. He still cooks from a relatively low-tech kitchen right next to the main dining room and the tables outside so that the cooking smells permeate everywhere. On our arrival, our noses were struck by the aroma of ripe French cheeses while upstairs our bedroom was perfumed by rich meat stocks. The main waiter has been working here for 27 years and knows all about the ingredients and vintages he is selling. And the 44-page wine list is hand written by Monsieur Jullien himself - there is not a computer in sight. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, vegetables still play a significant role in most of Jullien's dishes, in sharp contrast to so much contemporary French cooking.

Guy Jullien is slight, an extraordinarily hard worker like his wife, and extremely passionate about his restaurant. We left him at 11 pm talking to a table of local vignerons and I saw him again at 7.30 am the following morning taking in several cases and magnums of Clos des Papes as well as three trays of local goats' cheeses. Then he was off to the fish market from which he returned 45 minutes later with four boxes, one of which contained an 8.3 kg turbot that he proudly showed me, saying, 'I'm not sure why I bought this, it was so expensive, but it was just too good to miss.' Our breakfast was punctuated by the sounds of him wielding his filleting knife.

Jullien's menu is extensive. Eight starters, three fish and several meat courses, and an entire section devoted to dishes incorporating black truffles. These come from the village of Richerenches, about 30 kilometres away, which during the winter is the capital of the trade in these culinary gems and where, in a good year that now happens no more than once a decade, up to two tons of truffles can be traded in a week.

February is the month for anyone seeking the freshest black truffles but Jullien preserves enough to serve them throughout the year in an omelette or risotto; on scrambled eggs; or impregnating sweetbreads, a Bresse chicken, or the mashed potato in a glorified shepherd's pie the rest of the year - dishes that fill their own section of his menu.

The €50 menu opened with a stunning amuse-bouche of a pale green asparagus mousse on top of a much darker green, rich, chive sauce before truffles two ways: diced into a vinaigrette and served over a warm salad of French beans, carrots, mange touts and slightly overcooked asparagus and then generously studded through an omelette (for a €25 supplement). Then came a well-cooked saddle of lamb for two alongside a garlic mousse, a tian of courgettes and a thin flan of tomatoes. Excellent cheeses were followed by my choice of that classic, crêpes Suzette, as dessert because the setting and the style of cooking reminded me so strongly of meals of yesteryear.

Our discussion over Jullien's wine list started an hour before we looked at the menu and eventually we chose a 1992 Meursault Tillets from Patrick Javillier that combined freshness and richness, and a quite stunning (for the vintage) Domaine Jamet, Côte Brune 2002 Côte Rôtie (€125).

Both were in tip-top condition and the following morning as I followed M Jullien into the four cellars that lie under his restaurant, I came to appreciate just how much passion he has put into his collection, which includes numerous vintages of Château Rayas, the renowned Châteauneuf-du-Pape, and the greatest collection of Domaine de la Romanée-Conti I have ever seen in one place. He explained how he had just turned down an offer from an Asian enthusiast who wanted to buy the lot and what pleasure it had given him to serve it at his daughter's wedding.

The phrase Jullien used to describe Beaugravière was a 'maison simple' and certainly aesthetically little has changed. There is not a jot of glamour, and the nearby railway line and main road are drawbacks for those who stay here. But Beaugravière unquestionably passes the ultimate test for any great restaurant - I wanted to make another booking for the following week.

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