Nick and L'Escargot by an outsider

11 Sep 2012 by Mark Revelle

Nick was sent the following by Mark Revelle yesterday in response to an extract about his own restaurant career from his new book, The Art of the Restaurateur.

Reading the extract from your book in the FT prompted me to write and to offer a small prequel, as it were, to your career at L'Escargot.

In 1980/1 or so I was Simon Slater's deputy manager at the Zanzibar [a fashionable club in Great Queen Street], Nick [Smallwood who would beome maitre d' at L'Escargot before setting up Launceston Place and Kensington Place] having left to spend a couple of years in Sri Lanka. Our buffet chef was then Sue Miles, who had succeeded Alastair Little, David Schwarz and, if I remember, Anita Guinness.

Sue and I became allies, and one day she asked me if I'd be interested in setting up a restaurant with her. I had been three years at the Zanz by then and was happy to look at something new. We devised a plan, mentally picking our dream brigade including Alastair [Little, Nick's first chef] – for whom I'd worked as a waiter when he had Simpson's in Richmond – Adam Robinson *et al.* But we kept everything secret.

Sue started looking for suitable premises and I tried to raise some money from friends. Or rather, the parents of friends. She was more successful than I, and came in one day full of excitement saying she had found the place. I went with her to Greek Street [to see L'Escargot before Nick acquired it]. You will remember well the condition the building was in, but still I thought it was a wonderful, magical place. Eventually, Sue led me down to the kitchens. 'We have to buy this,' she said, grinning only slightly maniacally, 'if only because of these...' All along one wall was the biggest array of copper pots I have ever seen, ranging from a thimble at one end to a pot so large it could have swallowed two Robbie Coltranes at the other. Delighted and convinced we were on a winner, we tried to raise the money.

A week or so later, Sue came into the club and announced there was good news and bad news. The bad news was that L'Escargot had been sold. The good news was that it had been bought by 'that man I told you about who always wanted to back me in a restaurant [Nick]. I've explained the plans and he's happy, so would you like to be the maitre d'?'

I was so upset. I would have loved to own and run L'Escargot but I wasn't at all prepared to run it for anyone else, so I said no. Sue of course went ahead with all our plans and Nick took the role I would have had. I have to say, as I consider him the best floor manager I've ever seen in 40 years of seeing the best in London and Paris, there could not have been a better choice.

Appointing Elena [Salvoni, the face of L'Escargot] was also a masterstroke. In the early seventies an Italian friend kept highly recommending Bianchi's [where she worked before Nick poached her for L'Escargot]. Eventually I went there. Elena was wonderful, but it was appalling – complacent, poor service, dreadful food. I could have brained a policeman at 20 yards with the roast potatoes. I told my friend this. 'Yes,' he said, 'of course. No one goes there for the food – but Elena; isn't she marvellous?'

I left the Zanzibar not long after and in my new job I spent many happy lunchtimes at your restaurant, which I loved, both when irascible Alastair was at the helm, and later, the unflappable and brilliant Martin Lam.

One lunchtime I remember vividly. At 12.45 there were 10 guests. At 1pm probably 100 had arrived and the queue was out the door and down the steps. At 3.30 the place was empty. Martin came over for a chat. I asked him how it was possible to look so relaxed, how could he feed the multitudes with such good food, or indeed at all in the time available. If I cook for four people, I said, it takes me all day to prepare it. He smiled. 'At home, it takes me just as long,' he said. 'But here, it's down to the team.'

May I finish by saying that, in the extract I read, I believe you have seriously undersold L'Escargot, your place in it and its place in the restaurant revolution of the '80s which also triggered the regeneration of Soho. I lived in Old Compton Street for three years in the late '70s and the whole area was derelict. 'L'Escargot kickstarted the change. There had been

individually great restaurants before, of course, with chefs like Nico Ladenis down in Dulwich, but none was anywhere near as pivotal as yours. Between you, Nick, Sue, Alastair, Martin, Elena, the great food and Jancis' brilliant wine strategy, you changed not just the restaurant business, not even just the district of Soho, but also the face of London by demonstrating that eating out well was not just for those who patronised the discreet Michelin-starred establishments. These, after all, had been there for years, and had contributed nothing new to the capital. L'Escargot showed them, and all London, what could be done. It changed everything, and that is down to you.