The enduring appeal of the River Caf□

20 Sep 2012 by Nick Lander/FT

As I entered the sun-drenched terrace of the River Café, west London, early one evening recently, a scene confronted me that is now commonplace in the world's top restaurants.

A young Asian couple were sitting there, smiling, sipping their champagne and having fun. All this suddenly stopped as their waiter arrived with two plates of colourful food and their mood turned serious. Then, having carefully perused their plates, they simultaneously reached for their cameras and started snapping away before tucking in.

As I looked around the rest of the restaurant, what struck me most forcibly was, however, quite how different the River Café, which has just celebrated its 25th birthday, is from every other restaurant.

Ruth Rogers, the sole remaining founder since the death of her partner Rose Gray in 2010, is still behind the pass. Now in her mid 60s, Rogers remains ebullient and passionate about her food and fiercely determined to ensure that the 185 customers booked in that evening have the best possible time.

The menu looks at it has always done. Printed on a single sheet of A4 in a typeface that is not crystal clear (a little bit of colour would help), it is headed not just with the day's date but also whether it is lunch or dinner.

Down the left-hand side are the dishes in Italian, next to the English translation, and dotted throughout are dishes that the River Café has made its own: char-grilled squid with red chilli and rocket; crostini topped with crab, girolle mushrooms, tomatoes and summer squash; at this time of year, a whole grouse roasted in the wood-fired oven; and their chocolate nemesis.

Two major factors in why this restaurant has deviated so little are that, despite numerous blandishments over the years from hoteliers and developers, the original partners have never moved physically or philosophically. It remains their only restaurant and is still true to the principles laid out in the introduction to their first cookbook in 1995 (their various cookbooks have sold over 900,000 copies worldwide).

In this introduction they declare their shared love of Italian food but also how they were affected by the new restaurants then opening in California which overlaid European rustic cooking with American simplicity and directness. These influences are still obvious today, most notably in the emphasis that is continually shown not just on the main ingredient in each dish but also on what accompanies it.

This was best exemplified in a first-class rendition of *carne cruda di vitello*, finely chopped raw veal with a salad of mache and parmesan, a dish widely found in the restaurants of Piemonte, northern Italy. This calls not just for buying the very best meat and then dicing it precisely but also for adding the secondary ingredients in exactly the appropriate quantity. And then having the confidence to do no more.

One consequence of this approach, coupled with the march of time, is that the menu prices now no longer seem as high as they once did. The River Café will never be inexpensive, because of its ambitions and because its location in a heavily residential area means that it must be vacated by 11.20 pm, so their tables cannot be 'turned' to generate volume. But while the pasta dishes at £16-£18 deliver a gross profit many chefs will envy, the main courses at between £35 and £40 do not require the expensive side dishes that today inflate so many restaurant bills. With a burnt caramel ice cream, a pannacotta with grappa and raspberries and a tangy, dry 2000 Etna Rosso from Massimo Calabretta in Sicily, my bill was £175 for two including service.

That did not include the other aspects of this restaurant that never change. There is the tranquil 10-minute walk, weather permitting, along the Thames, having turned off the far more hectic Fulham Palace Road. And the prospect before turning into the restaurant of looking into the windows of the Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners architectural practice, of which the restaurant occupies the ground floor of the central area, and gazing at the models of numerous buildings of the future.

While the River Café has manifestly benefited from this symbiosis, most notably in the 20-metre bar and service counter along the far wall of the restaurant that is the envy of every chef, professional or amateur, it became clear in talking to

architect Richard Rogers that his wife's restaurant has had a thoroughly positive effect on his business. Its proximity and renown improve his clients' mood whenever they visit and, as he views food as a 'great connector', it also improves the morale of all those who work with him. And, he added with a real sense of pride, while he knew of other architectural practices with excellent staff canteens, this was the only one that had evolved from such humble origins to a fully-fledged, long-lived restaurant.

The combination of the food, the relaxed service, occasionally overly so, and the space means that the River Café also attracts two other distinguishing features of restaurants in Italy: families and children. But the noise of the planes as they come in to land at nearby Heathrow means that this can only be London. Although for some, even this has its advantages. Many are the visitors who ensure that lunch or supper here is the start or end of any trip to the capital.

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