A warm welcome in Barcelona WIP

9 Oct 2012 by Nick Lander/FT

Restaurateurs everywhere face a daily challenge – how to make their customers feel immediately welcome in what are often strange surroundings.

This situation is compounded by the fact that the menu and wine list are not necessarily the first things on their customers' minds. They may well be somewhat apprehensive, if it is an initial business meeting or a first date; preoccupied with the prospective seating plan around the table; and undecided as to whether they can nip to the lavatory before their guests arrive.

As I have pondered this issue, I have come up with another rule to match the long-held opinion that any restaurant's profitability is in inverse proportion to the quality of the food it serves. This is that the most immediate sense of welcome comes not at those expensive restaurants where the table is awash with gleaming crockery and glassware but devoid of anything edible but rather at those restaurants where the owners are overwhelmingly determined that the customer should have a really good time.

This was the rule I began to formulate within a minute of walking into **Sense Pressa**, a small family-owned restaurant in the heart of Barcelona. Our plane was late; it was 11 pm; and we weren't quite sure that we shouldn't have gone straight to the hotel. But there on the table was evidence that we were in the best of hands.

The evidence in question comprised a white plate holding a dozen green, plump olives topped with two halves of an anchovy and, by each wine glass, two slices of crisp baguette next to a wedge of good butter. This was inexpensive, welcoming, considered and immediate fuel for two tired bodies.

Sense Pressa is second home to the Diaz family and it exudes a cluttered, homely feel from the outset. There are a couple of tables on the pavement, two more inside the front door and then down a short set of steps, with cases of wine everywhere and six legs of ham hanging calmly to one side, are another eight tables. All of these were occupied by locals.

José Luís is the chef, although more than happy to process credit cards from his satisfied customers once he has been assured that they have eaten well. They will certainly have been well looked after by Isabel Cañedo, his diminutive wife, whose smile resonates around the tables, and their son Victor, who is responsible for the wine.

Dinner was a combination of Catalan favourites and that day's specials. Warm, tiny and ultra-sweet broad beans with diced ham; prawn croquettes; a subtle rendition of clams, garlic and chillis; and two thin fillets of turbot whose firm flesh was enhanced by a mouthwatering sauce of olive oil and vinegar. With this we drank a bottle of Palacios's Villa de Corullón 2009 Bierzo.

This was not the last vestige of the Diaz's hospitality. I am ashamed to say that I lost the argument to carry our suitcases out to the taxi and could only shake Señor Diaz senior and junior by the hand and stammer our thanks in amateurish Catalan.

We were to experience the same level of hospitality at **Bilbao**, a justifiably popular restaurant in the central Gràcia district for the past 57 years, but this time at the beginning of our meal.

The rain was so torrential that we arrived half an hour before their 2 pm opening for Saturday lunch as the waiters were having their staff meal. But they happily waved us in. Jordi Olivet, the chef here for two decades, took us through to our table and we used the next few minutes to dry off.

I have never seen a restaurant fill up so quickly. Just before 2 pm we four were alone. Five minutes later, every table was taken, the waiters in their blue shirts hurtling around to be joined 15 minutes later by Bilbao's jolly owner, Pere Valls. Wearing a cardigan that just about hid a considerable girth, he at first toured the rooms, kissing his female customers and the children, but quite soon he was hard at work too. When I asked him for a card as we left, he handed me a dozen and, justifiably proud of his restaurant, added 'For your friends.'

Olivet and his team certainly cook well enough for us to want to invite our friends back. Canneloni with truffles; diced ham again but this time on top of artichokes; a plate of unadorned, glistening plump girolles, just in season; a delicious rendition of grilled octopus with pimento and sliced potatoes; and a thoughtfully modest serving of oxtail with a cube of membrillo whose sweetness cut the otherwise fatty meat. All these dishes were served on brightly coloured plates, seemingly Catalan in every aspect, but which I could not help but notice were in fact manufactured by Churchill in Stoke-on-Trent.

Sense Pressa and Bilbao are not at the cutting edge of Catalan cuisine. But both carry the standard for a tradition of warmth and hospitality that has long been a hallmark of this region and I hope will only continue.

Sense Pressa Calle Enric Granados 96, Barcelona; Tel 93 218 15 44
www.sensepressarestaurant.com
Bilbao Carrer del Perill 33, 08012 Barcelona; Tel 93 458 96 24. *NB Cash only!*

Both about 40–50 euros for three courses without wine.