

## 2012 great. 2013 greater?

30 Nov 2012 by Nick Lander/FT

I can still recite the entire menu from my most memorable meal of the year even though it took place six months ago.

It began with a cool cherry gazpacho that was followed by a creamy, dark-green asparagus mousse. Two very different fish courses followed: delicate brochettes of squid with tarragon vinaigrette that were in sharp contrast to two large sea bass cooked in the oven 'fisherman style' and carried to our tables by several hefty chefs in their whites. Then came a slow-roast duck with pear chutney with the thigh meat gently falling off the bone, followed, as I bowed to family pressure, by a birthday cake.

This meal marked my 60th birthday with family and my oldest friends at Almadraba Park Hotel, outside Roses, north-east Spain, with the moon and stars hovering over the Mediterranean directly outside.

But I had been dreaming of this menu long before the dinner took place. I had used it to try and lull myself to sleep every night of my four-week stay in the London Clinic in March and then every night of my subsequent convalescence. This was not so much the case of good food as medicine, although I have no doubt that it is, as the prospect of this meal's providing the essential support my body, mind and spirit then required.

Alongside all the very happy memories from this meal, there is one detail of the service that is also unforgettable. This hotel is family owned and run by Jordi Subirós and Jaume, his father, who sensitively does not step out of the shadows too often. But as the two sea bass were first displayed and then served from the deep metal pans in which they had been cooked, there was the elder Senor Subirós leading from the front. His jacket off, an apron tied around his waist, he proudly showed off what the local fishermen had caught that morning.

This combination of two generations seems to me to be a leitmotif for all the best that I have enjoyed this year. Now I may be seeing this through rose-tinted glasses. I have already admitted to a significant birthday and this is the first and last time I will mention in this column that our son has followed in my footsteps as a restaurateur and has recently reopened The Quality Chop House in Farringdon Road, London.

But I cannot help feeling that the restaurant industry is at a significant tipping point: that many who set the highest standards are now more than ready to hand over to a younger generation. And for those who enjoy restaurants as much as I do, this leads to one inescapable conclusion: the standards of cooking, service and hospitality will only get better.

One reason for this is that there is now so much benevolent experience to go round. In west London, Ruth Rogers has now spent 25 years at the pass of the River Café dispersing the principles of Italian cooking alongside those of relaxed American hospitality. She prospers, as do a string of her former disciples: Jessica Boncutter at Bar Jules in San Francisco (pictured above); April Bloomfield at The Spotted Pig, New York; and Tim Siadatan at Trullo, north London.

In Paris, New Zealander Drew Harré has used his restaurant nous to bring together a young kitchen brigade and Eric Trochon, who has passed the rigorous Meilleur Ouvrier de France exams, and put them on show in a modern, open kitchen inside an old building on the Left Bank. The result, Semilla, is great food, fun and value.

In London's Soho, brothers Sam and Eddie Hart obviously have the advantage of the hospitality gene inherited from their father, Tim, who has made Hambleton Hall in Rutland so welcoming over the past 30 years. But it took great perspicacity on their part to revive the flagging fortunes of Quo Vadis by bringing in from the Blueprint Café the highly experienced, and loquacious, Jeremy Lee as head chef and partner. Turning around an underperforming restaurant requires considerable tact, judgement and taste - qualities that this restaurant, a rabbit warren of four interconnected buildings, now exudes.

Similar skills have been handed down by Michael and Judy McMahon 12,000 miles away on the seafront at Catalina in Rose Bay, Sydney. The ease with which Kate, their daughter, now threads her elegant way between the packed tables is obvious proof that this restaurant seems sure of a highly successful future. For Michael it reaches its apogee on Christmas Day when it will host three generations of the same family at several tables.

Three wonderful meals, in England and France, were entirely the result of the experience accumulated in the kitchen and the restaurant. The first was at Reads in Faversham, Kent, where David and Rona Pitchford make running a restaurant with rooms seem effortless. Their excellence is now rivaled close by at The Sportsman at Seasalter, run with exuberance, enthusiasm and charm by brothers Stephen and Peter Harris.

My professional heart was lost this year on a return trip into the hands of Guy and Tina Jullien, who have now spent 37 years together at La Beaugravrière at Mondragon in France's Rhône Valley. The fun of the truffles and the great wine list over dinner were enhanced the following morning at 8.30 am by the sight of the chef hauling an 8.3-kilo turbot out of his truck to the kitchen. He had just bought it, he explained, 'because it was just too magnificent to resist'.

The opportunity to deal with such produce is one of several reasons why many in their 20s are now seeking to make a career in hospitality and others are choosing to move into this exacting world from more lucrative careers. As they do so, they are encountering an unprecedented bank of advice and counsel. This is built on the fact, I believe, that over the past decade many chefs and restaurateurs have achieved a level of fame, fortune and recognition that eluded many of their predecessors. Most are therefore far more willing to pass on their wisdom and experience, and, while the restaurateurs and chefs of 2013 onwards will only benefit, their customers will do so even more.

Almadraba Park Hotel [www.almadrabapark.com](http://www.almadrabapark.com)

River Café [www.rivercafe.co.uk](http://www.rivercafe.co.uk)

Bar Jules [www.barjules.com](http://www.barjules.com)

The Spotted Pig [www.thespottedpig.com](http://www.thespottedpig.com)

Trullo [www.trullorestaurant.com](http://www.trullorestaurant.com)

Semilla, 54 rue de Seine, Paris 75006

Quo Vadis [www.quovadissoho.co.uk](http://www.quovadissoho.co.uk)

Catalina [www.catalinarosebay.com.au](http://www.catalinarosebay.com.au)

Reads [www.reads.co.uk](http://www.reads.co.uk)

The Sportsman [www.thesportsmanseasalter.co.uk](http://www.thesportsmanseasalter.co.uk)

La Beaugravrière [www.beaugraviere.com](http://www.beaugraviere.com)