Clos Maggiore - keeping everyone happy

7 Dec 2012 by Nick Lander/FT

As one of five equal shareholders in a company that could hold its AGM around the kitchen table, my roles are diverse.

As well as company secretary, I am also chief cook and glass washer. I am responsible for humping the two or three cases of wine that are delivered every week down the stairs for my wife, a fellow shareholder and the *FT*'s wine correspondent, to taste and also for opening them for her. And at this time of the year I choose the location for our company's Christmas dinner.

This is not quite as easy as it sounds. Obviously, I have the wherewithal to make the most suitable choice but the eventual destination has to meet different requirements.

For my wife, who may have tasted 20-30 wines during that working day (the colour of her teeth varies accordingly), it is the prospect of the liquid refreshment that still primarily excites her even when we sit down at 8.30 pm. She is not a big eater, certainly not of protein, and our children still tease her about the telling off chef Giorgio Locatelli once gave her when he saw quite how much of her main course pasta dish she had left uneaten at Locanda Locatelli.

I am more catholic, not just in what I will eat but also where, because, professionally, restaurants are theatre for me. I may get little out of my wife for the first ten minutes of any meal while she studies the wine list but I know that there will always be plenty of visual compensation.

This year's venue was Clos Maggiore, Covent Garden, and as we were shown to our corner table on the first floor the visual excitement came in several different forms.

The first was the warmth generated by an open log fire and the overall comfort of the room, with mirrors, curtains and plush chairs, which suit a building that dates back to Georgian times. This was enhanced by the democratic nature of our fellow customers that included a table of one black man surrounded by six black women. Another black couple subsequently sat down nearby with the man wearing a white suit no white man could carry off with such panache.

Clos Maggiore's wine list is so extensive that my wife said very little for the first 15 minutes other than to order glasses of a Turkish red wine and German Riesling as aperitif. Bowing to shareholder pressure, she did surface from time to time with the odd possible wine suggestion until eventually her face broke into a broad smile. She had unearthed a gem.

Having skipped the pages of Bordeaux and Burgundy, commenting all the while on the list's international range, and how quite exceptionally it seems devoid of any spelling mistakes, my wife caught the waiter's eye and ordered a bottle of 5549, Littorai Pinot Noir 2009 from California's Sonoma Coast.

She explained that not only had she never seen this wine on a list in the UK before but also that it is made by pioneer winemaker Ted Lemon in the state's cooler regions, a fact corroborated by its relatively low alcohol level of 13.6%. The wine's intrinsic charms were augmented by the restaurant's practice of serving it at precisely the correct temperature.

The menu is extensive, too, with seasonal and vegetarian tasting menus; the first and main courses, correctly and clearly laid out over two pages; and a comforting reference to the head chef, Marcellin Marc, who has been in charge of the basement kitchens for the past five years. And from my professional perspective, it was exciting to see that all the main courses are served with accompanying vegetables and that, in the £20-£22 range, they are reasonably priced for cooking of this quality in central London.

The dishes were generously served, too. The first courses - a light, attractive combination of Sicilian caponata with burrata, the soft cheese from Puglia, and a much more robust sphere of meat taken from a braised shoulder of rabbit from the Loire Valley - were excellent. The bases of each, the former a white onion pissaladière, the latter a circle of sweet and sour black radish, added complexity to each dish.

There was the same level of expertise in what followed: halibut poached in seaweed butter with Paimpol beans; cod with vermicelli and a chorizo sauce; and in the desserts, from Portuguese pastry chef Nelson Barros Sá. These ranged from

the contrasting flavours and textures on a theme of Bramley apples to a clever twist on the classic French dessert of floating islands with a blackberry compote underneath.

From the French maître d', I learnt two particular aspects of life behind the scenes at Clos Maggiore. The first was that the obviously talented Sá had been thoughtfully moved to the pastry section because he had found life in the main part of the kitchen too much pressure. The second is that business is currently very good in the evenings with a busy pre- and post-theatre sitting either side of the main dinner period.

Clos Maggiore deserves this popularity. Its model of an extraordinarily large, fairly priced wine list that encourages sales and therefore helps to restrain menu prices is most unusual. Any prospect of a shareholder revolt has been averted for another year.

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