Le Sergent Recruteur, Paris

3 Jan 2013 by Nick Lander/FT

Paris does not lack expensive restaurants. I have, however, eschewed most of them recently because although the cooking may be excellent, the service is invariably stiff and occasionally supercilious while the wine lists are too restricted to French wines and, more often than not, overpriced.

The recent opening of Le Sergent Recruteur on the picturesque Île Saint-Louis may signal that times are finally changing. What makes this restaurant so special has its origins in two extraneous factors, however.

The first is London. It was here that six of the talented team, four in the kitchen, including head chef Antonin Bonnet and his deputy Daniel Baratier (pictured above left), and two in the restaurant, including sommelier Alexandre Ceret, first worked together at The Greenhouse in Mayfair, exposed to a much wider frame of reference than is current in Paris. They have established their new professional home determined to imbue it with a more cosmopolitan approach to wine and a far more relaxed and friendly approach to their customers. In both, they have succeeded admirably.

The second and far more important factor in the extraordinary transformation of a narrow building that was once a tavern and is at least 600 years old is the French backer to whom Bonnet was introduced a year ago. It is he who has underwritten this venture and, bravely, has plans for at least one more Parisian restaurant next year.

While I respect this individual's wish for privacy, I can describe him. He is quite tall with black hair. He was wearing, as I watched him in the open kitchen, a blue scarf with white polka dots and he was conspicuously relishing his new role. In the relatively calm period before the restaurant filled up he enjoyed his new 'droit de seigneur' by talking calmly to Bonnet, eating snippets from the kitchen and occasionally talking on his mobile. Then he vanished.

As well as having the good taste to bring this team together, Monsieur X has also displayed great foresight in hiring Spanish designer Jaime Hayon to create a bar and dining room that still retains considerable historical charm with very modern decor that reminded me almost more of Barcelona than of Paris.

The modern comes first in an elegant bar that also serves substantial food from charcuterie that hangs in one of the fridges on display in the private dining room downstairs to sea bass with roast chestnuts and white-truffle risotto. This must be an added bonus for those fortunate enough to work or live nearby.

A set of elegant green curtains leads the way into the restaurant, where the old timbers have been whitewashed; a couple of glass cases display modern suits of armour; and your attention is immediately drawn to the far wall where a trompe l'oeil has been created to encase the kitchen.

The surround of this wall is highly polished mirror which encases a large piece of glass into which the pass, which allows Bonnet to hand the dishes to his waiters once he has approved them, has been inserted. (Photo above and top left by Benoît Linero.) Behind the pass I saw the female cooks wearing turned napkins as headgear in the style of wimples.

There is no menu in the restaurant. Instead, the staff engagingly ask for any intolerances or dislikes, crouching down to ensure ease of eye contact and then listing one or two of the more significant courses that night. Our young waiter had not gone too far into his speech before he explained that one of the dishes was a pithiviers with black truffles and in a rare moment of unilateral decision-making, I explained that this was the main dish we would like to share. My wife had already taken much pleasure from a wine list of sensible length that includes, in her opinion, exciting producers from Italy, Germany, Greece and Spain and is fairly priced, then chose a 2010 St Joseph, Chemin Faisant, La Ferme des Sept Lunes, 55 euros, to follow our glasses of Equipo Navazos manzanilla sherry.

A pithiviers, named after the French town, is a round, enclosed pie made from two discs of puff pastry that is equally suited to either a sweet or a savoury filling. I have a particular weakness for them in either variety, perhaps because I am so inept at pastry, but a savoury pithiviers is part of the classic French culinary repertoire (photographed here by Jancis).

Our meal opened gently, with a glass of carrot and apple juice and duck rillettes, before picking up excitement with sea urchin and butternut squash, diced squid with a potato broth and small slice of sea bass with parsnip puree and roast

chestnut. Then Baratier approached with a small wooden tray holding the glistening pithiviers and a professional smile of satisfaction on his face. It looked stunning but my wife sensibly asked for a brief pause. Baratier obliged and ten minutes later the dish returned, cut in two, with a salad and freshly grated truffles to the side and a glass jug containing the clear jus.

The contents were rich and impressive: layers of foie gras and hare, slices of truffle, all topped with a fillet of grouse and the pastry in this case glazed with honey and crushed juniper. The salad is a vital component of a dish that I could only face again in a few months' time.

Until then, congratulations Monsieur Bonnet. And thank you, Monsieur X.

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Our menu was 115 euros per person.