Eating in and around Essaouira

3 Jan 2013 by Nick Lander

Two equally excellent meals, in equally unlikely locations, on New Year's Day prompted me to wonder why I don't keep the one resolution that I make every year - to write even more about what and where I have the good fortune to eat so well.

I am, however, fully aware of why I have not fulfilled this resolution in the past. Firstly, I have to concentrate on my day job, writing for the *Financial Times*. Secondly, other things get in the way. And, finally, I am not always presented with such wonderful material.

But these two places are well worth visiting, certainly for anyone travelling to Essaouira on the coast of Morocco, two hours west of Marrakech.

The first restaurant is the restaurant of the **Domaine du Val d'Argan** winery created 20 years ago by Charles Mélia, a Frenchman whose family own Font du Loup in Châteauneuf-du-Pape He is now producing a very respectable range of Moroccan whites and reds. Having established a vineyard in a region where summer temperatures can stick in the mid-40'sC, this determined Frenchman has gone on to build a series of guest rooms around a pool and a restaurant on the first floor above the winery.

It is a very simple but elegantly designed long room with views across the vineyards and verdant countryside that really do seem to belie the fact that the Sahara is not that far away. It is rolling, lush countryside full of olive trees and the argan trees that provide the oil that is specific to this region - all of them bowing gently to the prevailing wind.

At the far end of the room is an open kitchen. This is the domain of Rahma, a matriarchal Moroccan cook, abetted by someone who could well be her daughter, and a young, smiling waitress. No sooner had we sat down than Moroccan hospitality displayed itself in bowls of pistachios, olives and peeled radishes. When we moved to the table this was supplemented by warm bread and dishes of the local olive oil and, slightly redder, argan oil.

First courses were an array of salads: sweetened carrots, peeled cucumber, deep fried cubes of aubergine, all of which looked even more appetizing on red, patterned bowls. But it was what followed that really impressed me.

There had been talk of a meshwi, the slow cooked roast lamb dish traditional throughout North Africa, but what emerged from under a large cloud of steam was an equally large dish containing a slow cooked shoulder of goat. Mélia stood over the table and with a carving knife and fork but the implements were completely unnecessary as the meat fell away from the bone instantaneously. It was delicious, rich and unctuous meat that, alongside some fresh, earthy potatoes that had been briefly fried exemplified the best of this country's cooking.

As we left, I made a point of thanking the three women for all that they had prepared and assuring them, with a smile, that this had been unquestionably my best meal of the year. We all laughed and wished each other good health for the coming year. I had no idea that I would be eating in somewhere even more engaging within five hours.

At 7.30pm one of the characteristic blue taxis of Essaouira dropped us by one of the gates of the medina, this port's old walled town. We then strolled in in search of the **Elizir** restaurant whose reputation for good Italian food and idiosyncratic design (on its flimsy card it states 'Cibo e Atmosfera, Food and Atmosphere') had followed us all the way from the first person who had recommended it to our daughter in Vogue's office in Hanover Square, London.

The streets here are much broader than those in Marrakech and although there is not a significant difference in what is on sale - smelly leather, pottery and pointed slippers - the atmosphere is much less frenetic, a sensation accentuated by the breeze off the nearby Atlantic.

Having walked for a while, we turned into the little passageway where we had spotted Elizir's sign two nights before. An attempt to make a reservation here by phone from Marrakech had not been successful so I had resorted 48 hours earlier to a ploy that has so far never failed: send in the blondes. On that night Jancis and Rose had climbed the stairs while I

waited downstairs and they duly returned with our booking at this extremely popular establishment.

We climbed the spiral stairs past walls tiled in a pale green. The stairs turn twice before opening out on to two main rooms of restaurant, the front one with no more than two tables. By the time we had walked round into the dining room at the back we came face to face with Abdellatif Rharbaoui who has so cleverly and seemingly nonchalantly assembled the interior of Elizir.

He was sitting behind his command post, once a white plastic table, on which the word HONDA was written on the front. Behind him was a music system and a vast array of CD's which provide sentimental jazz all evening. To his right was a basket containing the menus, in several different languages, that had obviously been printed some time ago from their worn lettering. He was smoking a cigarette, chewing gum and promptly smiled broadly as Rose, our 21 year old daughter, walked up to him.

After he had seated us in an alcove that housed four tables (Elizir seats only 30) Abdellatif explained to us, as we were then happily the only customers, how his Italian/Moroccan restaurant had come about. "I lived in Bologna, north Italy for several years. It was very cold in the winter but that is where I learnt to love Italian food. Then I came back here and opened Elizir seven years ago in what used to be a private house. I hope you enjoy it."

As though to accentuate our enthusiasm, his assistant arrived at our table moments later with a long, narrow white platter of four vegetable purees and a mound of ricotta cheese. These came with two warm, round Moroccan loaves that on their own would have made for a substantial first course. The choice of wine is limited to their house red, white and gris, the Moroccan speciality, but while we drank from the Sahiri range, Jancis noted that other tables were served different wines, suggesting that they simply serve the bottles they have to hand.

The food - cooked in the kitchen on the top floor, by young, comely Moroccan women - is terrific whether it is Italian or Moroccan. First courses included a deep bowl of pumpkin soup with a bruschetta coated in the local olive oil, superb gnocchi with ricotta, and an excellent rendition of squid ink risotto. A lamb tagine came with cinnamon and pears. An organic chicken tagine was flavoured with figs and gorgonzola. Ravioloi with almond pesto was on offer too. All were excellent.

So too was the feast for our eyes. Probably the simplest phrase to describe Elizir's interior is Moroccan kitsch. There is quite a lot of orange; a random collection of lamps, some of which work and some of which do not; there is a very varied collection of Moroccan art including the faces of two very striking black African women; and there are many other stylish and incongruous items obviously collected at random but all of which make one smile. It is remarkable, particularly as it comes with such good food.

Although Abdelatiff appears at the table occasionally, he does have another full time job which keeps him away from his seated customers: turning away customers who have either climbed the stairs without a booking or ring on the phone by his Honda-branded command station. During the couple of hours we sat there he turned away far more than he sat, very politely on every occasion.

As we were leaving, we watched one of the young cooks descend the precarious steps with a hugely generous, mouth watering slice of a thin chocolate cake for some lucky table. At the ground floor, I looked around at the restaurant's narrow double doors that hold the menu and noticed that it would be quite simple to add a piece of paper stating that the restaurant was full that night (it is not open at lunch).

But if there were something as humdrum as this, then many would miss out on seeing what is certainly one of the most idiosyncratic and witty restaurant interiors I have ever seen. And Abdellatif would miss out on the opportunity of showing off his restaurant of many colours.

Domaine du Val d'Argan, www.valdargan.com About 20 euros.
Elizir, 1, Rue Agadir, Essaouira, 05.24.47.21.03 About 40 euros with wine.