London's diversity under threat

21 Feb 2013 by Nick Lander/FT

In between a first course of poached lemon sole with mushrooms and a main course of veal, served as a blanquette and as two pink slices from a roast loin, I recently had to get up and sing for my supper in front of a room full of New Yorkers.

The setting was the atmospheric cellars beneath St James's Street in London of wine merchants Berry Bros & Rudd. Their premises date back to the late 17th century and parts are now let out as a popular setting for entertaining. My audience was a group of theatre enthusiasts who generously support our National Theatre and make an annual pilgrimage to London every February. What they wanted to hear from me is why eating out in London, which they had by then done quite a bit of themselves, is now so exciting. Fortunately, a phone call I received that morning gave me a particularly suitable introduction.

It came from Indian chef Sanjay Dwivedi, whose Indian food I have enjoyed in various London restaurants over the past 15 years. He wanted to know why I had not yet been to eat at his new restaurant, Coya on Piccadilly (pictured), where Dwivedi is now cooking Peruvian food (I have now eaten there and it is excellent). Here he is backed by another Indian, Arjun Waney, who made his initial fortune as a businessman in the US before opening such highly popular Japanese restaurants in London as Roka and Zuma, a business he has just sold 50% of to Dogus, a Turkish restaurant group, for whom this is their second London purchase.

These, I continued, were the three ingredients, albeit in reverse order, which continue to make London's restaurants so fascinating: money, an openness to new tastes and flavours, and an influx of talented chefs from all over the world to cook this diverse food. And while the first two factors may not change, the last and perhaps most distinctive, is definitely under threat.

London's available restaurant spaces, particularly in the West End, have attracted restaurateurs from all over the world. I was able to point the New Yorkers to two sites close to where we were sitting that had respectively been taken over by restaurateurs from the Middle East and Russia who had agreed to commercial terms that British restaurateurs had already baulked at. In a seemingly ever-rising market, these now seem very good deals.

But the culinary excitement stretches right across the capital and, in one of the incontrovertible rules of this business, is at its most exciting where the rent is cheapest. Many young Brits are today rectifying with great speed and enthusiasm the decades of neglect we paid to cooking skills. Head to east London on your next visit, I urged my audience, just as any enthusiastic eater visiting New York ought to head to Brooklyn.

Caution entered my voice only when I spoke of the threat the current talk of a block on immigration will have on chefs from overseas seeking to pursue their career in London (there were wry nods from those who could see parallels with the US). The increasingly draconian measures are already forcing several restaurateurs to curtail their plans because of the difficulty of securing work permits and this will soon begin to affect diversity and choice. One of the consequences of this is already obvious, in the increasing number of new restaurants offering no more than their own version of French bistro food. This can be very good but variety is the spice of restaurant life.

The first question from the floor went to the heart of this issue when I was asked, as I seem to be by every visiting American, where they could go for the best Indian food. My answers were: The Cinnamon Club, Veeraswamy, Imli, Amaya, Rasoi and Café Spice Namaste.

But, to reinforce my final point, once I had finished speaking, I grabbed my glass of Churton 2009 Pinot Noir made in New Zealand by Mandy and Sam Weaver, who once worked for Berry Bros, and was taken to another table where I sat next to a couple who could not hide their enthusiasm for London chef Yotam Ottolenghi.

Excited by the recent profile of him in the New Yorker magazine, they had gone to his Islington café where they had had a wonderful time even, they added, while talking to those alongside them in the queue. Through his cafes, books and Channel 4 series, Ottolenghi has become one of the most successful faces of contemporary cooking in London but it was only because he and his partner Sami Tamimi were allowed to settle here from their native Israel that they have been able to bring so much exotic pleasure to so many.

As we left in the rain, one American told me that the salad leaves he had eaten during his stay tasted so much better than those in New York and wondered why they could not be exported. 'Zabar's would sell them easily', he added. I pointed metaphorically to the grey skies and explained how concerned all chefs and restaurateurs are about this continuous cold, wet weather and its impact on food prices. Whatever food London's chefs are cooking, they are all hoping for sunshine.

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