Narbonne's perfect wine pricing

27 Feb 2013 by Richard Neville

In response to my recent article Wine tasting in Geneva and Narbonne, Languedoc resident Richard Neville sends this report on the innovative Les Grands Buffets de Narbonne - JR.

A self-service restaurant in which diners eat as much as they want (for €25.90 a head), that seats 500 and serves 240,000 meals a year does not seem to fit squarely with a wine list of 70 of the finest wines of the region.

I would associate such a list with a Michelin-starred restaurant. But after visiting **Les Grands Buffets de Narbonne** I now understand the underlying concept created by Louis Privat, one of the most philosophical and innovative restaurateurs I have met.

The first impression is disarming for the restaurant is located in a sports complex surrounded by a huge car park, but this is possibly a canny choice of location as it is the second most visited place in the Aude département after the old Cité of Carcassonne. I was struck on entering the restaurant by how warm the welcome was. This is an example one of Privat's many ideas: he delegates service management to the service staff who hold a meeting every morning to discuss improvements and even recruit new members of service staff themselves. For the chefs, an innovative kitchen design makes for a comfortable working environment with noisy machinery isolated and music of the team's choice. Works of art on the walls of the kitchen in engraved stainless steel and commissioned from a well-known French artists constitute another of his ideas. Happy staff lead to happy customers, and he has 85 staff to keep contented.

I doubt that many Purple Pagers would choose to visit the restaurant for its food, but among the huge range one should find enough to please. I did discover some *salade de wakamé yedo* lurking in the corner of a fish counter, but vegetarians, organic food eaters and those who care about the provenance of what they eat will be disappointed.

That is just the kind of feedback that Privat would welcome in his constant quest for improvement. After listening to his customers he has recently installed a mini kitchen in the dining area where diners can have a limited range of meat and fish cooked to their own specifications. On offer are fish and beef steaks cooked in front of you, steak tartare (beef or horsemeat) and lobster americaine. My tournedos Rossini was fine, although I did not notice any slices of truffle.

The normal self-service offering gives a choice between traditional French cooking and more lavish dishes, so daube de boeuf, escargots à la Catalane, tripes à l'ancienne, foie gras and oysters are always available, apparently. Incidentally, I learned that they sell 48 tonnes of oysters a year and 11 tonnes of foie gras. Charcuterie, cold fish and shellfish, cheese, salads and an enormous range of desserts complement them. I found an excellent aged Salers cheese and three different Roqueforts, all from Papillon. Chocolate lovers are given a feast.

Families are welcome. Young children, who eat for free, have a jungle play space and a television room in which to amuse themselves.

Regarding wine, the underlying concept that I had not understood is that the wine list is not in place to attract the affluent, discerning diner with a good knowledge of wines. It is to introduce the normal family to good wines; to allow them to drink good wines for the first time.

Everything is done to put the public at ease with wine by removing the mystique, the elitism, the solemn ceremonies and the embarrassment of not knowing about wine. *Désacraliser* (literal translation: 'to remove from its pedestal') is the word that Privat uses. He is currently considering how successfully to introduce a way that simply allows an unknowledgeable public to select a good choice of wine with a particular dish.

The wines are principally those with an established reputation, sold at the same price that the public pays at the domaine, €7.50 to €100. That is the equivalent of free corkage. All 70 are available by the glass at approximately one fifth of the bottle price. Restaurants in France usually buy wine from vignerons at a greater discount than UK restaurants can buy from UK merchants, so this restaurateur obviously considers that margin to be enough. He wants happy customers not fleeced by excessive wine mark-ups. His customers can trade up and the more they do the more he earns. Everyone, except producers of inferior wine, is content.

Every diner is given a copy of the wine list and staff are at hand to help them find suitable wines. Gone are the days when one person is handed the list and then has to choose a bottle that could never accompany everyone's choice of food throughout the meal. Whole bottles are available, of course, and that bottle is free if you subsequently buy a case of six bottles of it to take home: a 14% discount if my calculation is correct. Wines by the glass have a detachable small sticker on the stem with the name of the wine and the contact details of the property.

Privat is both an educator and promoter of the best wines of the Languedoc and Roussillon. He has put the ordinary member of the public at the top of his priorities by simplifying the service of wine and making the price more attractive. Diners who would pay €15 for an indifferent bottle in a cheap restaurant can here buy a bottle of Domaine Cazes' just-acquired Clos de Paulilles 2011 (estimated selling price in a typical French restaurant of €30-40) or a glass of Mas de Daumas Gassac 2010 white followed by a glass of Domaine de Cébène Felgaria 2011 red followed by a glass of Cave de Maury Centenaire. Privat points out that Cigalus 2011 by Gérard Bertrand is priced at €28 a bottle in his restaurant but is €70 in a gastronomic restaurant in Narbonne and €200 in Paris.

The restaurant sells 62,000 bottles of wine year at an average price of €13, of which 44,000 are served at table and 18,000 are bought to take away. Since this pricing policy has been introduced, the volume of wine sold per year has doubled and there is a 50% increase in wine drunk during meals. In 2010 the volume of wine sold by the glass was 15% of the total, now they are targeting 25%, an increase in sales by the glass of 66%. In total they sell 25 cl of wine per diner. This wine and pricing policy is obviously appreciated by the public as much as by the restaurateur, who says that it is 'far more profitable than the conventional model'.

To allow the public to sample some wines without eating in the restaurant, Privat has recently created a bar with an Irish theme in a most unlikely place, 'Le Private Bowling Pub' beneath the restaurant. It is under the direction of the sommelier Sophie Veyrat, is open to the public and offers 16 wines by the 2 cl and 12.5 cl glass with the same pricing policy as the restaurant. All are self-service. You buy a debit card at the bar, insert it into the Oenomatic wine-preserving machine and press the measure required for the wine of your choice, which is served in a decent glass. Before leaving, you are credited with the unused amount remaining on the card. I particularly enjoyed a glass of Milouise 2010 from Domaine Jean-Philippe Padié based in the upper Agly Valley at €6.40 per 12.5 cl measure (bottle price €32), one of Sophie's discoveries.

Many a restaurateur could learn a few lessons from Louis Privat. He exercises marketing in the purest form; satisfying consumer-led demand. Well, not quite, because with the wine element he is actually supplying wines that the general public did not know that they wanted. As a member of the public myself, I can only wish that more restaurateurs take heed of his wine and wine-pricing policies and introduce something similar. I never order bottles with an excessive mark-up in a restaurant, but if restaurateurs followed Privat's policies it would mean that I could drink better wine. Then I would eat in restaurants more often.

Les Grands Buffets de Narbonne