



Written by
Nick Lander
13 Jan 2018

A towering Parisian landmark



A shorter version of this article is published by the Financial Times.

I can still recall the incident as if it were yesterday. It was in the attic of our old family house in Manchester, where I discovered a menu from La Tour d'Argent in Paris and with it the number of the duck that my parents had enjoyed one evening before I was born.

Since then this Parisian landmark of a restaurant has always figured large in my imagination, but it was only the other day that I was forcibly reminded of this incident. At the end of her main course, a duck breast with baby turnips, new onions, spices and vinegar emulsion, Jancis, who had ordered the dish as much for the turnips and vinegar as for the duck, was handed a small certificate that indicated that her duck was number 1,1160,300, a significant rise since my parents' day.

It would be far from the truth to say that the styles of food and drink have stood still in the intervening 60 years but certain things have not changed.

This restaurant still occupies the sixth floor on the corner of the Quai de la Tournelle on the south bank of the Seine, its owners having won an argument that went as far as a vote in the Assemblée Nationale to allow a building above the five floors that were prescribed as the maximum for any building in those days.

The entrance, still quite formal, has been softened slightly, although the passageway to the lift is littered with photos of leaders past such as De Gaulle and JFK as well as a whole host of memorable menus. As the lift approached the sixth floor I began to appreciate why this visit, my third, was so completely different from the previous two. The first two had been in the evening but today we are here for lunch on what is a glorious day. The sunshine pouring in through the large windows temporarily blinds us all. It takes a few seconds for us to acclimatise and then we begin to appreciate what distinguishes this gastronomic landmark.

All the waiting staff, male and female, are in evening dress with only the restaurant manager in a grey lounge suit. The table settings are quite formal, the white tablecloths starched to precision. André Terrail is now in charge instead of his more formal father Claude (although André bows and kisses the hands of my wife and our female guest). The views from the windows are stunning: of Notre Dame off to the left; of the centre of Paris beyond, all the way to Montmartre; and at our feet is the restless river traffic. There is no doubt that the views from this restaurant are far more arresting on a good day than on any evening – only surpassed by those at sunset.



Having set up this lunch with wine-minded friends for a specific reason, I was somewhat surprised to find we were here under a misapprehension. My Paris-based friend had confided in me that the British-born sommelier David Ridgway (above), who has been in charge of this restaurant's remarkable cellar for over 30 years, was to retire quite shortly. It transpired, between him serving us our champagne, a 1996 R L Legras, Blanc de Blancs from Chouilly, and a bottle of 1999 Cornas from Thierry Allemand (290 euros), that this is not in fact the case. Ridgway will continue with his full sommelier duties until at least August 2018 when, during the month in France when no one chooses to work, he will reconsider his position but, understandably, plans to keep on his close working relationships with the vineyards while abandoning the heavy lifting to those with younger legs.

Over the years – and Ridgway first came to Paris as head sommelier here in 1981 having begun his career as a 19-year-old at the Waterside Inn on the Thames in 1975 – he has acquired all the genial attributes associated with this profession. As he patrolled the room, Ridgway reminded me of a genial teacher walking around an examination hall – without the fear that memories of the latter once inspired in me.

At the beginning of the meal, because of where I was sitting, I was unaware of Ridgway approaching with the wine list. This is probably the largest and most comprehensive, certainly of French wines, I have ever seen – about four inches thick. So daunting is it that many customers simply leave it up to Ridgway and his colleagues to decide on the wine once they have decided what to eat. Jancis could not resist grappling with the list and remarked on how unusually rich it is in half bottles – a fact that Ridgway confirmed, having said that he preferred serving halves rather than wines by the glass. Having settled on Cornas in the Northern Rhône, an appellation she and our guest had discussed over the years, she left it to Ridgway to decide between

Allemand's Reynard 2002 and the 1999 and it was he who chose the latter.

It was now time to study the menu as three amuses-bouches arrived for each of us. Alongside the large à la carte menu that offered a €280 five-course tasting menu created by Head Chef Philippe Labbé and his team, of whom five were named personally, was an equally formal three-course lunch menu for €105 each. This comprised a choice of a quenelle de brochet in homage to some unspecified person's grandfather or scallops served raw and lightly cooked, topped with a tartare of raw scallop enlivened by yuzu and served with a combination of under-seasoned fennel and a very fine smattering of tiny tart herbs. (The Tour d'Argent lunch menu does not explicitly offer a vegetarian option at either course and this was the first time for a long, long time that I have not been asked about food allergies!)

Then there was the choice of the duck or a skate wing served with capers surrounded by flakes of almonds and burnt, baby leeks, the creation of someone in the kitchen armed with a very fine pair of tweezers. Then on to dessert, a vanilla bourbon, a very successful creation of ice cream topped with the lightest meringue or a dish described as poire Williams that was a rather bland combination of sliced pears and a visually but not gustatorily dramatic black sauce of pear juice mixed with vegetable carbon. A side dish of olive oil ice cream topped with a thin layer of meringue was, however, far more successful, as were the petits fours.



Ridgway's wines, still stored in the underground cellars that are kept at a cool temperature by the humidity of the neighbouring river, is enormous: 320,000 bottles or, as he describes it 'about 20 years' stock'. They sold off about 17,000 bottles or 3% of their original stock several years ago as they decided to cut the number of covers in the restaurant from over 200 to nearer the 100 that they manage today with their private dining room. As Ridgway wistfully recalled, they have lost a number of the larger tables, of six and eight, as companies have cut back on their entertaining budgets and families have also stopped entertaining so generously.

When I asked Ridgway about the changes he had witnessed in wine sales, other than their prices and the different (often Asian nowadays) nationalities of those who today make up most of those able to buy them, he became quite philosophical. 'I suppose that it is the change in the way people eat, that they seem more attracted by series of tastes rather than sitting down to

sharing a meal together. The cooking programmes on television also exacerbate this situation. There has to be more theatre on the plate and we have had to move our cooking style on to accommodate this.'

La Tour d'Argent will always be a last bastion for those who want to enjoy the best French wines, many that today most restaurateurs can only dream of listing. Today this famous experience is enhanced by the cooking of Philippe Labbé and his team.

La Tour d'Argent 15 quai de la Tournelle, 75005 Paris; tel +33 (0)1 43 54 23 31