That hotel restaurant may have very little to do with the hotel...

Restaurants are a constant topic of conversation almost everywhere these days but even I was surprised at the speed with which the subject of hotels franchising out their restaurants came up around our dinner table recently within a group made up entirely of enthusiastic restaurant goers.

After a few moments I ventured my personal opinion. I have had excellent meals in the restaurants alongside the Kimpton hotels along the West Coast, who pioneered this association. Alain Ducasse manages to excite in hotel diningrooms whether in Monaco, Paris or New York. And a meal at Nobu in London's Metropolitan can be exceptional. But I have also suffered an equal number of disappointments. The most recent was at Brasserie Roux in London's new Sofitel (poor food, friendly service); the most memorable, albeit for the wrong reasons, at Mju in the Millennium Hotel on Sloane Street where, whilst we were eating dinner at 10.30 pm, the waitress was laying up the next table with pots of jam for the following morning's breakfast.

And I added that the current scenario, which sees Gordon Ramsay taking over The Connaught and Gary Rhodes at The Lygon Arms, Broadway, is not encouraging for two specific reasons. Firstly, that the culinary traditions and training which these established hotels have inculcated, and often underwritten through profits from the bedrooms, will be abandoned as both parties - hotels and the associated but independent chefs - seek to maximise profits.

And, perhaps more importantly, if hoteliers, whose *raison d'être* is to offer hospitality, simply hive off their restaurants, what is left of their business? They might as well, I added, franchise out housekeeping, laundry and concierge facilities.
I had, unfortunately, reckoned without one friend's highly analytical mind. 'I accept the argument about preserving culinary traditions, but you know hotels have never been the unified business they appear,' he explained. 'Most, if not all, the buildings are owned as freeholds by a property company and the hotels managed over a fixed period by independent companies such as Four Seasons, Marriott and Hyatt. Perhaps what is happening is just a further fragmentation of the hotel business.'

For clarification I turned to Ramon Pajares, wise but not so old man of the London hotel scene. As General Manager of the Four Seasons, Pajares had made a great success of the hotel's restaurant by splitting its banqueting from the much smaller restaurant and putting the latter in the hands of the talented Bruno Loubet (now, sadly for London, cooking in Australia). When he became GM of The Savoy Group, Pajares took one look at The Berkeley's underperforming restaurants and decided to break with hotel tradition and franchise them. He brought in Jean-Georges Vongerichten from New York to open Vong, a success he then trumped by persuading Pierre Koffmann to relocated his La Tante Claire from Chelsea to the Berkeley Hotel.

Pajares began by being highly objective. 'Of course, there are major advantages on both sides if the arrangement works well. The chef has access to the hotel's guests, its financial backing and support systems, particularly their PR departments, and of course every arrangement seems to generate a lot of publicity these days. And for the hotel and their guests this association provides culinary excitement that has often been missing for years.'

'But,' he added more ominously, 'any such association will only endure if two basic conditions are fulfilled. The first is that the building has to be right. There has to be easy, immediate access from the street to the restaurant without any impression being given that it is part of the hotel. The Oak Room [no longer a Marco Pierre White restaurant] in Le Meridien did not meet these criteria, for example, because you had to walk through the lobby to get to your table and there was the smell of chlorine from the swimming pool downstairs. And, of course, the chemistry with the chef has to be right. If not, it is a nightmare.'

But Pajares's successes have been the result of two very different commercial approaches. Whilst at The Four Seasons he had brought Vongerichten over to London to cook and they had talked of working together. It did not take much to persuade Vongerichten to move east, particularly as the hotel shoulders most of the risk. It put up all the capital, engages and feeds all the staff and covers all the running costs. It fell to Vongerichten to implement the concept and dishes initially and then, on a continuing basis, to send over regularly from New York chefs and senior management who introduce new dishes and maintain standards. In return the hotel receives a percentage of total sales but Vong remains, in essence, an arm's-length management contract.

Despite the plush interior, La Tante Claire is still definitively Koffmann's restaurant. Although the hotel paid for the redesign, the kitchen and, crucially, a new entrance off Wilton Place, Koffmann employs, trains and pays all the staff. This is, in effect, a self-contained French island within an English hotel now owned by Blackstone, an American investment company. To avoid what is often a common cause of complaint from hotel guests - that despite spending £250 and upwards for a room they cannot get a table in the hotel's restaurant - there is also an intricate but considerate arrangement by which the hotel reserves up to four tables a night until 4pm for
its residents and if these are not filled it pays Koffmann half of the table's average turnover.

Although he listened to my concerns, Pajares believes that this franchising process will continue to grow not just because it fills hotels' previously underperforming restaurants but more importantly because it comes at a crucial stage in the development of the profession of the hotelier.

'A good hotelier used to be a generalist, someone who was pretty good at a score of different disciplines. Today, a good hotelier is someone who can arrange for the best quality in every single department for all those disparate groups he now has to satisfy whether they are customers, shareholders or the hotel's owners. And to achieve this he or she must hand over certain aspects to those who are more expert, an approach which allows the hotelier to concentrate on other aspects of the business, such as IT, security or marketing which I am rather relieved to say were not as important when I first came into the hotel business as they are today.'

Pajares's views certainly put a different perspective on this association. It is not just a matter of hotels sweeping chefs off their feet with their open chequebooks but, more equitably, it is the chefs, by collaborating with hotels, who are allowing hoteliers to concentrate on what will mean an even better level of service for their guests.

But my concern is that restaurant goers as a whole may suffer. One immediate and sad consequence seems only too obvious, that as a growing number of top chefs enter into these partnerships the number of independent restaurants, run by highly individual chefs/patrons, will decline. Ensconced in plush hotels, close to one another whether in London, Paris or New York, these chefs may, in forgoing independence for financial security, have abandoned a fundamental tenet of their profession.

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