



Written by
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Tomy - needs a commis



The beginning, how you are welcomed into any restaurant, and the ending, how you are treated as you pay your bill and are seen out of the door, are two crucial factors in any restaurant's make up, and certainly play an enormous role in how I perceive, and write about, my experience in restaurants.

And in these two aspects, restaurant Tomy in Paris's seventh arrondissement conspicuously failed on the night we ate there. And this failure was due to one glaring omission, their lack of a commis waiter.

These hard-working assistants have, unfortunately, almost disappeared in small restaurants, those seating between 40 and 50 as this restaurant does. The main reason for this is financial. The restaurateur believes that he can no longer afford them and the waiting staff seem no longer prepared to let him, or her, share in their allocation of the service charge.

But they play a crucial role in the successful, smooth running of any and every restaurant. Their roles may not be glamorous, but they are important: changing cutlery; carrying the plates of food from the kitchen; clearing tables; setting up the correct cutlery for the next course. Essential jobs.

Yet most importantly, what the commis waiter does is to allow the actual waiters and waitresses to get on with looking after the customers. To the taking the orders; to keeping an eye on when their customers have finished their first and main courses; to taking the wine orders and to topping up their glasses; and to presenting the bill correctly.

Such commis waiters are usually not too difficult to find. Waiters at the beginning of their career; often students whose aim is to supplement their grants; it just takes some physical strength and a willingness to carry plates with a smile on one's face. The reward is invariably a staff meal; some cash; and an evening when you cannot spend anything other than your fare to and from the restaurant.

The two waiters and one waitress at Tomy did not have any of this essential assistance and it showed. We arrived at 8.15 and the entrance looked promising. Above the hatch, behind which the coffee and wine service is located, there is a heading in the black and white colouring that is the restaurant's motif that reads 'Life is Food', a sentiment that I believe all of us will agree with.

The waitress already seemed overburdened, and having to double up as the receptionist obviously flustered her. Eventually, she found my reservation and took us to a very nice table. The room is L-shaped with tables running round it with a large table for wine service in the middle, higher tables at the end and the kitchen beyond.

Looking round the room, it provided a snapshot of Paris in July. There was a table of three Japanese at the next table with the younger woman and older man in deep discussion to the exclusion of the older woman. There was another table of two American couples. There were two tables of French couples, one younger and continually on their iPhones, the other 15 years older who never looked at them. The rest seemed to be French, other than us, of course.

Tomy Gousset's approach to writing a menu that will please such a diverse audience is notably brave. It is brief, five first courses, five main courses and four desserts. And it certainly is adventurous with relatively little on what I would describe as the safe side in either the first or main courses. The first dish on the starters was vitello tonnato, and among the main courses were duck, a rump of veal and half a Breton lobster. More on the quantity of the main ingredient in this dish to follow.

The wine list is good, although it reads better than it actually is. We tried to order a bottle of red Château de Fonsalette 2007, a particular favourite, at a good price but were told there was no more left. From a list that specialises in the wines of the Rhône, we then chose a Domaine du Tunnel 2016 Condrieu for €85, a wine that was probably a more suitable choice for a hot evening.

Our orders for starter, main course *and* dessert were all taken at the beginning of the meal, in the French way. We had both ordered the vitello tonnato, Jancis commenting that she was always looking for the ideal version of this much traduced dish. Having had a fish-only diet for some time, she ordered the duck next, myself the lobster, and then I had ordered the rhubarb cake with lemon-verbena ice cream and Jancis the 'cheesecake' (picture above right) made from Ossau Iraty, the Basque ewe's milk cheese that is her favourite but in this case transmogrified.

Our starters were good but somewhat unexpected in appearance. On the base was a thin layer of calves' brain, as mentioned on the menu, that was topped with a thin smear of mashed tuna, a combination that was enlivened by shavings of pickled onions and grains of mustard. This was an unusual, attractive and impressive dish.

As I watched the waiting staff running around the room, I began to appreciate the absence of a commis waiter. The restaurant was now full and the three waiting staff were being pulled in too many directions.

Our main courses were disappointing, the duck slightly less so than my lobster. While the duck was generously served, if a little tough, there seemed little synergy between my lobster, described as half a lobster and breadcrumbed, sitting on a sauce of white beans and chorizo. If this was half a lobster, then I wish I had been served the other half, as it must have been twice the size. And the crispness of the coating of the lobster made it more difficult to comprehend why these two ingredients had been paired together.

At the beginning of our meal, Jancis asked me why they bothered to take our dessert order, to which I replied, so that they can serve you more swiftly. How foolish I was proved to be! Whereas our cutlery came immediately, we had to wait 15 minutes for the dessert. When they arrived, I asked for the bill immediately, an act that was to cost me dear.

Having handed over my credit card to pay my bill for €191, I was about to be handed the credit card back by our waitress when she dropped it. It landed on my dessert plate, and the spoon containing the ice cream fell on to me, liberally coating my suit jacket, the back of my suit trousers and, most regrettably, my treasured Christmas present of a light turquoise Craigie Aitchison painted silk tie.

The waitress was most apologetic and tried, unsuccessfully, to recompense us with a couple of glasses of wine. There was, however, no mention of any contribution to the dry cleaning.

But, if this restaurant had employed a commis waiter, I'm sure this waitress would not have been as harassed as she undoubtedly was. And I may have been spared an extra item on my dry cleaning bill.

Tomy 22 rue Surcouf, Paris 75007; tel +33 (0)1 45 51 46 93. Closed at the weekend.