



Written by
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What's wrong with French restaurants



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Many, if not most, of the provincial towns and cities across France have at least one restaurant like the one I am about to describe.

The waiters are formally dressed in black trousers, white shirts and black bow ties. Most of them have a rather tired look on their faces. There is invariably an exterior terrace and an older, more formal interior that perhaps houses some mementos of the restaurants' more distinguished past.

The tables that were originally covered in linen now have paper tablecloths. There are a couple of blackboards propped up against a wall listing that day's specials.

The female receptionist, a woman of an indefinable age – perhaps the owner, or a descendant, and certainly the most elegantly dressed person working there – stands on guard between the two areas and as close as possible to the bookings book and the pile of menus.

That was the scene as I walked in to Le Noailles, a restaurant that has occupied a cool corner of the Allées de Tourny in the centre of Bordeaux since 1932.

I use the word cool because in the era when restaurants such as Le Noailles were first planned, when air conditioning was not the norm, establishments that handled fresh, perishable food had to choose their location carefully.

I had planned to eat somewhere else that night with a couple of friends but one dish spotted on Le Noailles' blackboard while walking past prompted me to book a table for dinner here later that night instead. *Lamproies à la bordelaise*, lampreys stewed in a red wine sauce, it read, and I was sold.

Lampreys do not receive a good press, quite justifiably. An ancient, jawless fish that is finally returning to certain British rivers now that water quality has improved, the lamprey has long been popular in south-west France and northern Portugal, where they are gently stewed in red wine so that no physical attributes clearly remain.

Lampreys are a dish of this particular region in the same way that choucroute is a dish to be eaten in Alsace, a cassoulet in Castelnaudary or a bouillabaisse in Marseille.

Once seated in the exterior section of Le Noailles, we found evidence of this restaurant's more glorious history when we were handed the menu. This hefty 10-page document in French and English has on its cover the painting shown above of the animated restaurant in its prime. Every table is taken. Every waiter looks smart and assiduous. And as an indication of just how good the service used to be, every customer's eyes are locked upon those of their companions.

But once opened, the menu reveals another story. Several dishes have lines through them, including the sauerkraut dish that the restaurant was founded for, and several of the pages are torn. The wine list, at the rear, suffers from the same ignominy with numerous vintages and prices carelessly amended by hand.

Nor is the wine list particularly inviting for anyone looking to explore the wines of Bordeaux. Vintages are recent and the best value seems to lie in Champagne – we drank a bottle of non-vintage Louis Roederer champagne for €72 that had the added attraction of extra bottle age. Presumably there are few takers for such a celebratory drink.

The wine went surprisingly well with all the dishes that we ordered – all competent if unexciting. Our first courses were *grenier médocain*, a local dish of pork belly served cold; bone marrow; and, more fashionably, burrata with cherry tomatoes. There followed a confit of duck leg; a duck breast; and my bowl of lampreys stewed with fennel and served in a thick, almost black sauce with white boiled potatoes.



With a couple of desserts, the bill I was presented with came to the incredibly low sum of €130. When I questioned our waiter as to whether it was the restaurant's policy not to charge for champagne, his response was typically French.

He neither apologised nor said thank you. Instead he went off and came back with his electronic order pad to prove that the fault was not his. He had typed in the order. So he was in the clear.

He then returned with an amended bill for €210.50 as well as a bottle of non-vintage Moët, and three half-sized champagne glasses. This he promptly opened and poured us three *coupettes* by way of a thank you.

This gesture absolved him, he must have thought, but it did not exonerate a style of waiting that is all too common in French restaurants of this style and age. Our waiter had been terse; he had been on his iPhone at the bar when we wanted to order; and he had the habit of walking only in straight lines while undertaking one job at a time. He is regrettably too old to change.

But radical change is not something I would wish on Le Noailles nor the many other restaurants in France like it. They have been standard-bearers of a style of cooking for decades during which they have given countless thousands of customers, such as myself, many hours of pleasure.

So on Bastille Day 2018 I would like to thank all those who work so hard in these restaurants. And to give them some advice: that it is only the process of continuous improvement and innovation that will keep them thriving for the next 86 years.

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