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Who'd be a restaurateur in a heatwave?



7 June 2018 *As London gets more and more summery, we reprise a three-year-old article by Nick, spelling out some of the unexpected effects of hot weather on restaurants and restaurateurs.*

1 July 2015 It was approaching midday and I was sitting outside interviewing Ruth Rogers, chef and patronne of the long-standing River Café in Hammersmith, west London, for my next book *On The Menu* when Vashti Armit, its highly regarded manageress, stepped out on to the terrace (shown here) and cast her eyes to the sky.

It was warm and muggy but Vashti was optimistic. 'I think the weather will hold and we will be able to seat all our customers outside', she said with a mixture of pleasure and relief.

This scene has been re-enacted in southern England every day since the recent spell of warm, dry weather set in by every restaurant manager fortunate enough to have a large outdoor terrace on which to sit their customers. Because this hot weather really does change the rules of the restaurant game.

It does so in several different ways but in the most critical respect it goes against the fundamental principle of hospitality, that of immediately agreeing to whatever the customer may ask for. This is because doing so - promising anyone and everyone a table on the terrace - is simply not practicable.

No well-trained receptionist can or will guarantee the customer a table on the terrace. They may say 'We will do our best to accommodate you' or 'I've made a note of your request and I will pass it on to the general manager'. But nobody who has ever answered the phone in a restaurant with a terrace for more than one shift will give such assurances. If they were to do so, chaos would ensue.

The obvious explanation for this is the nature of weather itself. However glorious it may appear at noon, the weather can change swiftly and when the rain comes or the wind starts to blow, it means that every table, and all that they contain, must be relocated inside immediately.

I have been a customer in such a situation and it is not a pleasant sight, with damp food, unhappy customers and waiters running in every direction. There is invariably a bottleneck too between the terrace and the interior of the restaurant and that causes further friction. Those who were least upset the last time I was a spectator in such a situation were those who sheltered under a tree with their wine until the rain passed and then calmly walked back to their table once the rain stopped.

At this stage, the inexperienced or greedy restaurateur can be exposed once again. Terraces can often accommodate more customers than the interior of many restaurants, so there is the obvious temptation to fill them all, to make hay while the sun shines as it were. But if this happens, and the sun does decide to disappear, then the manager will face the extra challenge of squeezing, for example, 80 unhappy customers into the space that comfortably seats only 60 (and on those occasions the tips are unlikely to be good).

So do try to be understanding the next time a receptionist fails to guarantee you a table on their terrace when you request one. They are doing their job correctly and this is the response you should get from a well-trained receptionist even at a sun-drenched restaurant in London, Paris, St-Tropez or the Algarve.

And, as the weather turns hot, there are other changes a restaurateur has to cope with.

Firstly, because terraces are invariably located further from the kitchen than the main restaurant, the distances the waiting staff have to walk in the higher temperatures are much longer. This is compounded by the fact that the sales mix also changes with the hotter weather. Quite understandably, we order less food and more to drink, often of the non-alcoholic kind, and this is a different *modus operandi* to the way most restaurants are designed to operate. Customers are prepared to wait for their food, aware that it has to be cooked, but they want those refreshing drinks immediately.

What people want to eat is obviously very different too. The accuracy of today's weather forecasts is obviously a huge boon to restaurateurs and chefs in predicting and preparing what their customers will want to eat in the heat but my memories of trying to predict the English

weather as a restaurateur in the 1980s are that whatever we did invariably ended unsatisfactorily. By the time we had prepared a chilled soup, poached a few salmon or roasted a piece of beef to serve cold with a salad, the weather had changed and these dishes inevitably ended up as the staff meal.

Then there is the flip side of the unusual pleasure of eating outside, particularly in central London. After a few days the traffic fumes and noise outweigh the appeal of the sunshine and the attraction of a cool, well air-conditioned room reasserts itself. Customers who not long ago demanded a table outside now want to be back in the shade.

The restaurant may then return to normal, although a certain proportion of potential takings will have been lost to the rival claims of the sandwich shops, pop ups and supermarkets that provide food for those who want to lunch in the park.

Finally, many thoughtful restaurateurs will also have incurred one more cost. To placate their kitchen brigade, locked up in a hot steamy basement kitchen without a glimpse of the sunshine that puts so many of us in a good mood, they will have had to send down quite a few beers at the end of each service.