

Raymond's nervy sidekick

PIED à Terre is a rather famous and highly regarded restaurant in Charlotte Street, its rather famous and highly regarded chef, Shane Osborn, having garnered a couple of Michelin stars. I've never been there. People keep telling me to go – telling me how marvellous it is, telling me how it's just my "thing" (though how they can know that, I can only wonder). Anyway – never been. Partly because people keep telling me to do it (it's the same with books, films and the hottest new TV series – it took me years to catch up with *The Sopranos*, which I agree is magnificent ... I simply didn't want to be told to do it at the time, that's all). And. Um. Where was I, now ...? Oh yeh – so partly because people kept on telling me blah blah blah, and partly because I just never seem to find myself in Charlotte Street, these days. It's not quite anywhere really, is it?

So anyway, David Moore is the proprietor, and I watched him with fascination as one of the inspectors in *The Restaurant*, that embarrassing TV series fronted by Raymond Blanc who, as I have noted before, in his inimitable accent instructs complacent restaurateurs "not to be lezzy, but to come out farting". David Moore is the tall thin bald one with slitty designer spectacles who always seems to be restrained yet nervy in a way that suggests the lurking of a just about repressed and total nervous breakdown. When it was the turn of some oafish, hopelessly inept and indolent would-be restaurateur to act as front of house in Pied à Terre, Moore was restrained and nervy to the point of meltdown. On being informed that napkins and glasses were a millimetre out of position, the yobby wannabe pretty much cashed in his chips then and there, sulkily confiding to camera – if memory serves – "I can't, like, be bovered viv viss – narmean? Can't be arsed, really". I only mention all this to

The tall thin bald one in TV's *The Restaurant*, David Moore is the proprietor of Pied à Terre and L'Autre Pied. Known in the trade for being a real perfectionist, **Joseph Connolly** decides to see for himself ...



underline the fact that Moore is a total perfectionist – known for it in the trade – and the Pied à Terre website devotes great space to not just food and drink but the "experience" of dining there. Such fervent litany is absent, however, from the site of his sister Marylebone restaurant L'Autre Pied (geddit?), and now I know why. Because here I have been, and can tell you that while the cooking, by 27-year-old Marcus Eaves who last year

earned his first Michelin star after only 14 months in the job, is extremely good and highly professional, the "experience" of eating here is thoroughly non-existent. Sterile, is the word. The place is scrupulously hard-edged and gleamingly clean and ordered – napkins and glasses bang on their marks – but all with the air of having been composed by someone who in their own super-duper kitchen at home would not dream of introducing bread into

FACTFILE

L'AUTRE PIED

5-7 Blandford Street, W1.
Tel: 020-7486 9696
□ Open for lunch: Monday to Friday noon-2.45pm, Saturday noon-2.30pm and Sunday noon-3.30pm.
Dinner: Monday to Saturday 6pm-10.45pm and Sunday 6.30pm-9.30pm.
Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆
Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆
Cost: Set lunch £17.95 for two courses, £20.95 for three.
A la carte expensive.

the Dualit toaster for mortal fear of the resultant crumbs. How they can bring themselves to admit through the doors the horrendous mess that is humanity is utterly beyond me.

To call the smartly turned-out lady at the door a "greeter" would really be the cruelest of jokes. She stared, checked off my name and took my coat. I felt as if I was in Matron's surgery, queuing for a jab – whereas in fact I was there to have lunch with my agent. No – can't call him just an agent, for he is no less a personage than Jonathan Lloyd, the CEO of Curtis Brown, Lord help me – an Uber-agent, then, and maybe one of only two such in London (the other being the Blessed St Ed of Victor, whose own agent, you may care to know, is Jonathan Lloyd. Small world, eh?). Anyway, Jonathan – who is as puzzled as any man standing as to why an Uber-agent such as himself comes to be saddled with so footling a client as I – reported when he rolled up a bit later (law unto themselves, agents) that he had received precisely the same frosty reception. So there: not just me, then.

The rest, though, was good. Eventually, I had been shown to a horrible table in the middle of the

floor in an emptyish restaurant, so bagged the cosy one by the window instead, this action occasioning yet more ice to form. The lady sommelier (sommeliere?) was very sweet and chummy, though, and the £6.50 Prosecco from the Veneto exceptional: drier than usual, and packed with pears. Other wines were offered not just by the glass and bottle but also as a 460ml carafe which, at just under two-thirds of a bottle, is pretty nifty, once you've got an opening snorter down you. So we went for that – an Australian Pinot at £17.60, rather like a flat cherrycade though actually rather yummy.

The set lunch – £17.95 for two courses, three quid more for three – runs only to a couple of choices: Jonathan went for confit of organic salmon, cauliflower cream and dill chantilly, which he was rather surprised to like a lot, such itsy-bitsy fussiness being not really his preference. I stole a little – and it was perfect: just unraw, gently warm and filled with a depth of flavour. As was my roast breast of quail with confit of leg, aromatic jus and braised celery (spelt "briased" on the menu: where is the perfectionism?). This doesn't sound like a starter, I know, but it was very small. Superbly tender and intense – served with the thoughtful addition of a Lilliputian soup spoon, to deal with the terrific jus, which indeed was mesmerisingly aromatic, just as advertised. Another of these dinky wee spoons came with my main: saute of spatzle, baby spinach, mushroom foam and a soft poached hen's egg (spelt "hens" on the menu: where is the perfectionism?). Spatzle translates from the German as "little sparrow" and is, therefore, noodles. "Some soft, some crunchy," the waitress said – which I wasn't sure could be right. All soft, as it turned out,

and very good too. Simple ingredients artfully combined by the splurge of yolk into a highly pleasing tongue-tingling treat. Jonathan – who, as I say, doesn't go for bijou presentations of jewel-like lunches – again was nonetheless delighted with his slow-cooked pork belly, beurre noisette, pomme puree, Jerusalem artichoke, sweetcorn and pinenut sauce: sounds huge, but it wasn't at all – leaving him room for a pudding in the form of a carrot and ginger cake with rum and raisin ice cream (in baby swirls like those teeny Iced Gem biscuits of yore) as well as cinnamon something or other. This looked like the foam in the old fairy Liquid adverts when the child asks her mother why her hands are so soft (to which there is a more modern riposte, with the mother snapping back "because I'm 12 years old, you little bastard" ... but let it lie).

All in all, Jonathan very much enjoyed, he said, "three small and exquisite courses, done to perfection". As did I – but my cheese was very mean: two thin triangles of what should have been billed as Cropwell Bishop Stilton, but appeared on the menu as "Stilton-Cropwell Bishop". So where oh where is all this perfectionism then, eh? If everything here was as good as the cooking, the place would be a miracle. It took us an age to get a glass of Pomerol to round us off nicely: the sommelier (sommeliere? Hardly mattered now) had vanished from the planet, and the very young waitress was unsure as to what Pomerol might actually be. "Do you ..." she asked very hesitantly, "maybe have a suggestion ...?"

Jonathan and I looked at one another. And we nodded.

□ All past restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

THE wine world is full of lovely people, but two of the nicest I've met recently are Charles and Philippa Sydney. Their enthusiasm for the wines they bring to the UK market is overwhelming – and those wines are delicious.

Charles describes himself as "courtier en vins de Loire", a continuation of an historic practice originating in Bordeaux where courtiers bought wine from the chateau owners and sold it on to the merchants.

Certainly, that middleman role is a big part of what the Sydneys do – they facilitate some 10 per cent of Loire wine sales in the UK. But they go further. In partnership with some very good winemakers, suitably credited on the bottles, they've developed the La Grille range of classic Loire wines, from crisp sauvignons to serious barrel-fermented chenin blanc, from soft pinks to crunchy reds. La Grille distribution is steadily widening, with Majestic and Waitrose the best sources (see stockist details below).

This year is a particularly good time to be exploring the vinous pleasures from a region better

Loire Valley is not just for chateaux

known to many Brits for its chateaux than the 400 million bottles of wine it produces annually. While 21st century vintages have mostly been pretty good, last year was exceptional and the grins of both growers and buyers at the region's major wine fair earlier this year were broad indeed.

The Sydneys have, appropriately, tagged it "the smiley vintage" and, though it's an exaggeration to say half the UK wine trade was at the Breakfast Benchmark Tasting they organised alongside the fair, there were some very influential people pouring and poring, which augurs well for consumer choice.

The 2009 whites, full of fruit and charm, are already reaching the shops. The reds, warm, rich, sometimes even voluptuous, will follow soon, delectable in both youth and maturity.

lower than the ever-rising norm.

Beyond the big names such as Sancerre or Pouilly Fume, there are less familiar appellations which can provide just as much pleasure, often for less cost.

One delight I've recently discovered is Anjou-Villages Brissac, where cabernet sauvignon joins the Loire's more familiar cabernet franc and the Sydneys' star is

Jean-Hubert Lebreton, fifth generation vigneron at Domaine des Rochelles. Jean-Hubert has worked at top Bordeaux chateaux, but his passion is to create the best possible wines from the

family domaine.

In London recently, he led me through a memorable six-vintage vertical tasting of the 90 per cent cabernet sauvignon La Croix de la Mission, fascinatingly different from year to year but always – even back to 2001 – with fine fragrance and ripeness. It's an impressively good wine, and a bargain. The stylish 2008 (£15.75) has just arrived at London stockist Haynes, Hanson & Clark (www.hhandc.co.uk, 020-7584 7927, 12

bottles upwards free delivery, 10 per cent discount on unmixed cases).

Little brother L'Ardoise (Anjou rouge), 90 per cent cabernet franc, is another gem, pure aromatic pleasure (2008 £8

www.thewine.society.com, 2009 £9.60 Haynes, Hanson & Clark.

Stockist information: Majestic has six La Grille wines, Touraine sauvignon 2009, cool-fermented chenin blanc 2009, vouvray 2008, pinot noir rose 2009, rose d'Anjou 2009 and pinot noir 2007, all £7 (£6 if you buy at least two). Waitrose stocks the barrel-fermented chenin blanc 2008 £9 and classic sauvignon 2008 £8.

Other recommended, readily-available Sydney-courtiered wines include Chateau Gaillard Reuilly 2007 (M&S, £10), any of the Domaine de la Taille aux Loups and Domaine de la Butte wines at Justerini & Brooks (from £8.25, see www.justerinis.com) and those from Chateau Pierre Bise at Bibendum (from £14.25, www.bibendum-wine.co.uk).

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