



## The Anatomy of Success

By Naomi Barry in Paris

### *L'Ami Jean... The Paradox of... Go for a Little Less and Gain a Little More*

*L'Ami Jean* is a 50-seat Left Bank restaurant in Paris which bounces along from success to success despite being counter current to all norms and trends. The usual pattern for a successful middle range Paris restaurant is to pack in as many tables as the premises can hold. For maximum profitability, lavatories are shunted into the cellar or hidden upstairs via a steep narrow staircase. If the cuisine is good, the customers grudgingly put up with the inconveniences. At this point the average boss will try to take advantage of his popularity by squeezing in another table on the main floor.

Not long ago Stéphane Jégo, the 39 year old maverick owner-chef of *L'Ami Jean* — one of the hottest addresses in town — took a pot shot at the local way of thinking. Instead of packing in more clients at each service he removed four tables from his overall, the equivalent of eight paying customers.

Stéphane acquired the locale seven years ago. It immediately became a lighthouse of conviviality, hospitality and generosity, serving a savory cuisine unique as his signature. The decor of plain wooden top tables is authentically 1930's rustic. No, that is not Jean Gabin in the corner but it could be.

The food is sublime. Pinkish curls of sweet ham, sliced to transparency can be had only from sows during their 3 month post partum period. Eat them with country butter spread on Poujouran's country bread. But hold back. The ham is just a prelude. Celine or Mario pours a pitcher of Parmesan soup over a mound of infinitesimal bits that somehow retain their individual identities. This day Stéphane was into turbans wrapping a slim slice of pork breast around a tasty farce. For a vegetarian version he had replaced the pork with a slim slice of leek.

The clientele is beautifully free of cliques, a rare treat in Paris. In the atmosphere of Just People, one feels free to chat with a neighbor. The air of village fete is part of *L'Ami Jean's* charm. As far as Stéphane knows, the restaurant he adores is unlisted in any guide which is the way he wants it. Word of mouth is enough. He has no desire to cash in on the clone of a second place, to lend his name to brand products, to compile his recipes into a book. Publishers cajole him for his recipes. "I can't. The second time around, they are never the same."

Stéphane, however, harbors a romantic streak beneath his rugged Breton exterior. He loves his restaurant but he yearned for a touch of palace as well. Happy as a kid at Christmas, he bought an elaborate crystal chandelier to illuminate the space where the four banished tables had been. Instead he is substituting a single table around which friends can gather to exchange ideas and indulge in real conversations. The women will wear their prettiest dresses. The finest food and wines will contribute to the recreation of a more graceful era.

This romantic enclave will have its formal debut in December. No walls separate it from the rest of the establishment, only the trick of theatrical lighting. A single proviso: Don't try to muscle in as a twosome. The space will be reserved for parties of six. Otherwise it won't have what Stéphane has in mind.

One day last April a distinguished gentleman called on Stéphane, he introduced himself as the brigadier responsible for the next lunch of the Club des Cent, the most illustrious gastronomic society in France. Its 100 members—gourmets all—are esteemed doctors, lawyers, academicians, professors, CAC 40 (French equivalent of Fortune 50) businessmen, et al. The lunches are serious affairs and usually take place in dining rooms where the table cloths are of gleaming damask and the service follows the rules of Escoffier and Ritz. Members often bring their own wines from their private stocks.

"I want my lunch to be in a bistro," explained the gentleman.

For most establishments to be chosen by the Club des Cent is akin to being tapped for knighthood.

"I think you better go elsewhere," said Stéphane, when he heard about the wines. "This is not that kind of place."

With great urbanity they talked a few minutes more, smoothed their differences, settled the details and shook hands...the talented off beat chef and Professor Yves Grosogeat, the internationally celebrated cardiologist.

At the end of the lunch which was a triumph, Stéphane in a thoughtful gesture passed around special cigars imported from Havana. Since the entire restaurant had been transformed into a private party, the no smoking rules for several hours did not apply. The company puffing happily went over the moon.

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