

COUNTER CULTURE

By Naomi Barry in Paris



The Success of Breaking the Rules



Philippe Braun and Eric LeCerf.

After six years, Joël Robuchon's trail blazing l'Atelier is still the most sought after restaurant in Paris. There have to be reasons why. In 2003 Robuchon's return from retirement was awaited with the interest of Mlle Chanel's return from retirement two decades before. Curiosity was intense but the buzz was mostly negative.

"He won't last two months" was the prediction.

One day in August, feeling lonesome because all my friends were out of town, I decided to treat myself to lunch at l'Atelier which operates full steam seven days a week, 12 months a year. Incredible, in a town where vacation is sacred.

Paris in August is wonderful or awful. Business is down to a flutter. Butcher, baker, and most of the neighborhood restaurants are 'en vacances' until September. In the shuttered, quasi-abandoned city, l'Atelier was blessedly open and full as usual. Hep visitors from half the world and the odd Parisian in town for one reason or another. The atmosphere was a relaxed We Happy Few. The place was packed.

"Amazingin, I said to Eric LeCerf, one of the chef-partners who was at the helm that day. "I thought nobody was in Paris. What is your secret formula?"

"Our figures are 15% higher than this time last year. In fact our figures have been going up steadily since the beginning." "Before we opened we were nervous. It was a risk. We had staked our entire savings and our future on this radical concept." LeCerf sounded gratefully surprised.

The success of the pioneer team has led to the string of l'Ateliers, Robuchon has since opened on three continents.

Philippe Braun, Robuchon's trusted lieutenant, leaves Paris from time to time to analyze and to control the details of each new Robuchon property. He was soon off to Taipei for a final look at the latest in the group.

Under the Robuchon umbrella, the Paris l'Atelier is a working partnership of four members of the brigade at Robuchon's former restaurant, Jamin. The quartet - Philippe Braun, Eric LeCerf, Eric Bouchenoir, Antonio Hernandes - had earned its stripes. Working at Jamin had been tough as a Marine Boot Camp. At l'Atelier, one of them is always on active service, insuring there is never a lapse in performance. The customer does not detect it but the discipline is almost military. These days the group has added another chef to its galaxy - the talented, rosy-cheeked young Axel Manes.

Today the public has accepted everything that the gloom-and-doom prophets of 2003 had predicted they would never accept.

1. You still can't walk into l'Atelier unless someone opens the door for you from the inside, a technique reminiscent of Manhattan's speakeasy era.
2. No Reservations. The howl was so great the house compromised. You can now reserve for the 11:30 a.m. lunch service and the 6:30 p.m. supper service. Otherwise you have to take your chances. Let's face it. Being a regular does help, whenever there is a possibility.
3. Whether you are feeble or fat, you have no choice but to perch on a high stool (there are 41 of them), elbows on the counter. There are no tables. More people than not accept the game plan.

The quality of the food had won out. Every plate placed before you on the counter is a summit of "Haute Gastronomie".

"We have the products," said Philippe Braun in partial explanation of what is so special about this particular l'Atelier. "France has every thing, if we look for it."

Baby lamb chops from a breed discovered in the Pyrenees are an exquisite staple on the Paris bill of fare. They are unlike any I have ever tasted... tender and subtly flavored with thyme from mountain meadows: The tiny chops are dainty enough for a party hosted by Alice in Wonderland.

"Part of our secret lies with our network of suppliers," said Eric. "Over the years I have built a list of over 200. In the morning I can phone a fisherman on the coast and ask for 50 sea perch. That evening I will have my 50 sea perch, fresh from the sea. Our customers know that never do we serve a fish that has been farm raised."

Guest and staff, face to face on either side of a counter, have undergone an altered humanized relationship. The waiter is no longer an

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anonymous servitor but a key figure in the ritual between kitchen and client. The waiters, an exceptionally appealing bunch, admit to loving the chance for brief conversation with the customers. You may not notice that surreptitiously everyone is giving a wipe and a polish. The high maintenance is part of the rigorous discipline.

In a limited way, the Paris Atelier tries to emulate the ethic of the traditional Japanese inn (the Ryokan), which aims to satisfy the desire of the guest before the guest has had the chance to even voice his desire.

Recently a waitress overheard a trio of regulars discussing the imminent birthday plans of one of their number. She alerted the pastry kitchen. At the meal's end a surprise birthday cake was presented before the trio.

Clients, thawed by the affable atmosphere, frequently chat with the strangers sitting next to them. "A couple of nights later," said Eric, "I've seen these same strangers back again together - this time as friends."

French Fries are an icon of France. Some are good, some are better, some are terrible. The very very best have a maximum of crusty exterior. L'Atelier wanted to produce a superlative French Fry to serve with its Steak Tartare.

The solution turned up in the drawer of a farmhouse kitchen cabinet in Poitou. Someone remembered the purpose of the housewifely gadget of corrugated tin, which resembled a toy-size Pipes of Pan.

"I saw my grandmother use one," he said. "She would press it into the sides of a large potato. The potato became a mass of spirals doubling the surface of a conventional French Fry."

The naive kitchen aid probably sold for next to nothing during the 30's. Armed with the prototype, the l'Atelier team located an artisan willing to reproduce it by hand.

"We need 10 of them", said Philippe Braun. "The gadgets cost us 100 euros each. More than 1,000 euros for a few platters of 'pommes frites' as we like them." You have to be crazy. "We're crazy," said Philippe with an irresistible smile.

Simplicity at l'Atelier in Paris is the simplicity of Marie Antoinette playing elegant milkmaid at Versailles. The luxury is still there but stripped of its more elaborate trappings. The charm is in the paradox.

My lunch at l'Atelier was a jolly affair. I had a giant prawn clasped in a delicate, paper thin crust presented like a jewel on a rectangular plate of artistically troubled glass, accompanied by a small pool of emerald green basil sauce. There were three of the irresistible baby lamb chops and a little iron pot of Robuchon's signature mashed potatoes.

I talked with a pair of chocolatiers from Belgium on my left and a couple from Ireland on my right. The Belgians offered me a glass of Champagne. Giovanni, the sommelier who looks as if he stepped out of a painting by Veronese, filled it half again. I couldn't have had a better time.

Naomi Barry