Celebrating off-radar, old-school and classic restaurants

Bouillon Chartier
7 Rue du Faubourg Montmartre
75009 Paris

The boiled egg looks like the sort of thing that used to turn up in my school dinner ‘salads’, an oafish thing stained purple from vinegary beetroot. The one in front of me shares the dark ring that used to appear round fudgy yolks, so thick you could slice it with a knife. Great cooking this most emphatically is not.

Do I love this dish? I do not: it is not a loveable little number. But it’s also perfectly serviceable: I eat it quite happily. And I do love our location, Paris’ venerable Chartier, or Bouillon Chartier: it’s one of the only two left in the city. What a place this former railway station is: Chartier inhabits the Paris of all our fantasies, the Paris of endless possibilities. Dating back to 1896, its soaring columns, glass globe light fittings and glittering, foxed mirrors reflect a scene that never stops buzzing until the last light goes out at night. Sure, it’s in Right Bank’s solid 9th arrondissement, but in its heart it’s far more branché than bourgeois.

(If it’s not to your taste, that’s fine: Chartier is not: it is not a loveable little number. But it’s also perfectly serviceable: I eat it quite happily. And I do love our location, Paris’ venerable Chartier, or Bouillon Chartier to give it its proper name: a place that once sold broths and stews; with the equally OTT Belle Époque era Bouillon Racine – right down to the carrottes râpées on the menu.)

The pace is frenetic; there’s no such thing as a downtime at Chartier. Perhaps if you keep up in the afternoon you might avoid the queues that snake along the Rue du Faubourg Montmartre, tourists and locals alike, but inside it’s still a full house.

Nothing seems to faze the staff, no amount of bemused Japanese families prodding gingerly at those eggs, no number of rancous loud groups intent on getting toasted on Gérard Bertrand Réserve Spéciale Chardonnay 2015 at 13 the bottle, or little pichets of sangria at a laughable three. I expect the usual cur scrubgeonly Parisian service, but the waiters in their long aprons – the traditional rondin – are balletic as they manoeuvre the huge, crowded room and twinkle with warmth. Well, sure does, at least.

The long menu, its design pretty much unchanged over the years, spoons out with every fabulously hoary bistro cliché you could hope for: tête de veau, sauce Gribiche; bœuf de foi gras de canard (stratospheric, by Chartier standards, at seven); terrines and Lyonnais sausages and pigs’ feet and tripe. It makes me come over positively misty-eyed. There’s even a Franco-Italian, defiantly non-al-dente spaghetti Bolognaise, and the member of our party who insists on ordering that deserves everything she gets. It has the texture of chewed blotting paper.

Charterie is a stranger to frou-frou presentation, unless you count the glass bowl that contains an excellent, sharply dressed endive salad stuffed with generous chunks of ripe Roquefort. Choucroute Alsacienne arrives looking as though the kitchen had flung all the ingredients – the sauerkraut, hefty slab of ham, priapic sausages and Spartan little boiled spuds – so they just happened to land onto the plate. I’ve learned under these kinds of circumstance to keep it simple, so the pâte de rumsteack is winking at me hard. It’s not bad in its buttery, chewy way; the almost certainly frozen frites are salty and crisp, the meat a decent slab of protein leaching rosy juices into a sauce heady with brandy and plenty of peppercorns.

I’m sure I ate something virtually identical in a ‘posh’ Glasgow restaurant when I was about twelve years old – if I’d ever read the bloody book, I’d probably call it Proustian.

Every piece of wisdom about Chartier says you must finish your meal with the famous ‘chantilly cream’, so we do. Its recipient is astonished: “it’s just a bowl of sweet, whipped cream!” and it pretty much is. I’d expected perhaps a little langue de chat or something with which to scoop it up and leave the, well, creaminess of it all. But, uncompromising as ever, there’s no mucking about.

Our meal for three with that one bottle of decent wine – it may not cause our hearts to soar, but it’s more than gluggable – costs just over 70 euros, the bill scrawled directly onto our paper tablecloth. That egg dish weighs in at 2.20 euros; a tomato and cucumber salad: one euro. This is nobody’s idea of groundbreaking cuisine but it’s so shruggingly, quintessentially French it should be smoking a Gauloise while necking a pastis and launching a new political party.

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