

Eating out

Giles Coren

THE TIMES



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Perilla

I wrote a couple of weeks back about the stress I experience when trying to eat in France as compared with England: the problem of being in a land where I do not know the best places or how to get into them or be treated well in them and how it makes me long for home.

The thing that was unwritten there (at least, I don’t think I wrote it) was that the difference has less to do with my own lack of local knowledge and more to do with my not being immediately recognised as a critic and minor celebrity by the house

and treated appropriately (and when I say “appropriately”, I mean, “obsequiously”, “fawningly”, “embarrassingly gushingly” ...).

Well, no sooner had I written and filed that piece than I headed off again to France, this time to Île de Ré, and experienced something a hundred times worse. No, a million times worse. Which is being recognised by literally everybody in the restaurant, EXCEPT the restaurant itself.

If it was going to happen anywhere, it was going to be in a place like Saint-Martin-de-Ré, the island’s principal town, which is a marina so beautifully French, so traditionally and perfectly Gallic that all the people cycling about in stripy Breton tops and berets, carrying baguettes under their arms and onions round their necks, are English. All

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of them. All the people sniffing fruit in the markets, flicking through *Le Trésor de Rackham le Rouge* in the Tintin shop, gesticulating wildly as they haggle at the jewellery stalls, whistling *La Marseillaise* and puffing on Gauloises while ogling the girls, are as English as you or me. Or Nigel Farage.

And because they've been there before (year after year after year), they know that to get a table at Le Bistrot du Marin you have to arrive at 6.50pm and stand around looking innocuous, then pounce on a table like a dog on a fox turd the moment they give you the nod. We'd been told to get there at 7pm (by our charming hosts at the beautiful Villa Clarisse, not two minutes away), but took the advice lightly, rolled up at a frankly insulting 7.03pm, found the place heaving and were told where to stick it.

"Can I leave my name?" I asked the head waiter in French.

"No point," he replied in the same language.

"Can I come back in an hour?"

"If you like, but there won't be a table."

"Is there anywhere else worth eating around here?"

"Not really."

"Can I at least book for tomorrow?"

"No. We don't take reservations. Now off you toddle."

And so back out I stomped through the restaurant, rejected, through the outside tables towards the glittering marina where my wife and kids stood, starving and expectant, to break the terrible news. At least, I consoled myself, nobody was there to witness my humiliation.

"Bad luck, Giles," said a voice.

I looked down at a ruddy-cheeked fellow in a terrible shirt tucking into some langoustines.

"Love that show you do with her off *MasterChef* – bet they reserve the tables for you on that. Ha ha ha ha!"

"Yeah, don't tell Monica they wouldn't serve you!" chortled a sunburnt woman at another table as laughter swelled round the tables like a Mexican wave.

"You here to review it?"

"Er, well ..."

"Don't they know who you are?" yodelled a fat Yorkshireman through a mouthful of pommes dauphinoise. That one really brought the house down.

"You've come to the right place, though," said another. "The food is fantastic. Do you want to try the steak tartare?" And he held out a forkful towards me to general hilarity so extreme that I truly hoped, sorry, feared that several of the diners would choke to death on their meals.

Thus the problem of holidaying in a chic tourist mecca, full of charm and history, with very few cars but lots of bicycles and oyster shacks, which is just expensive and inaccessible enough to keep out hoi polloi: it attracts

almost exclusively readers of *The Times* food section and watchers of BBC Two travel shows.

The waiters looked across towards me, baffled. How was it that everyone knew this portly paterfamilias? Why were they all talking to him? Why was he talking back? Bof, who cares? Not going to help him get a table. And so I hobbled off, feeling a total prune, to be turned away from three or four more restaurants until our party was eventually, sulkily accepted by a down-at-heel pizza joint where we were served some bendy calzones and a bottle of ordinary table wine for only €4,000.

It reminded me of AA Gill's advice to me years ago, not to do television: "It will make you famous but won't pay terribly well so in the end the general public will know who you are

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but you won't be rich enough to avoid them. One day, they'll all be pointing and saying, "What's Giles Coren doing on the bus?"

Or worse, pointing and going, "Ha ha, Giles Coren can't get a table."

So, much as we enjoyed Île de Ré (and the excellent meal and service we had at the Bistrot du Marin when we came back at the right time, forewarned and forearmed, a couple of days later), it was a joy to be back in England after the long summer and to look in my diary on the first working Monday and see "Dinner at Perilla – 7.30pm – Arnold Wisbeech".

I didn't know what Perilla was or why I was going there but I knew it was for a review because "Arnold Wisbeech" is one of the stupid pseudonyms I use and I always write it in my diary to remind myself who to say I am when I get there (even though they are bound to know that it's me; it's just part of the game). I'd obviously booked it weeks before, knowing that I'd get back from holiday at the end of summer and need to get a review filed pronto.

Googling it for the address as we got in the car, Esther said, "Ooh it looks great – young handsome chef who's worked everywhere, doing posh Nordic things in a casual setting at Newington Green. Waze says 18 minutes."

And it was. All of those things. Close to home, elegant, casual and beyond excellent. It's a triangular spot with lots of window onto

the (Esther says) unexpectedly fashionable denizens of Stokey. Inside it was lots of very well-dressed small single-sex girl groups (as good local restaurants usually are these days, at least early in the week) and a warm welcome from a great waiter who flagged up their Monday night half-price deal on some of the better bottles of wine, "to give people a crack at some stuff they couldn't normally afford". So millennial, so Stokey, so beautiful.

The menu was small and most of the highlights appeared on a five/six-course tasting menu (£44) so we ordered that. The first two snacks out of the kitchen fair blew me away. The first with its beauty: a shimmering green floret of kale, baked crisp and blobbed with jewels of emulsified egg yolk and avocado. The second with its soul and vision: "Yesterday's bread soaked in moules marinrière", a firm sliver of soaked bread presented in a nest of mussel shells and tasting like the perfect last bite of all the shellfish suppers I finally managed to nail on Île de Ré.

Then burrata underneath slivers of finely mandolined but barely cooked new potato and fresh gherkin with wonderful olive oil; a glistening and varied leaf salad (no two leaves repeated) under which nestled a dune of petits pois à la française with cod rillettes turned into it; and then five perfect slices of Herdwick lamb, uniformly pink with a ribbon of yellow fat and a paper-thin brown crispy edge, under which puddled a courgette and parmesan cream that was the perfect condiment to it. And the meadowsweet crème brûlée was rich and eggy and – Esther said – sexual (though she didn't follow through on that thought in any meaningful way later).

It sounds simple, almost dull, but it so, so wasn't. The presentation was restrained but with a saucy twinkle. The tables – squares of rough-hewn timber with dainty steel cutlery laid on a bright linen napkin, a fat candle and the small, cream menu with its pretty botanical pencil etchings – were knowingly, almost comically instagrammable in the (all-important) natural light of the floor-to-ceiling windows.

I've been raving up the likes of Cornerstone Brat, Cora Pearl and Ham recently as burning stars in the new London restaurant firmament but this place, which has been quietly becoming more and more wonderful over the two years since it opened (to good but not slobbering reviews), is right up there with them. ■

Perilla

1-3 Green Lanes, London N16 (020 7359 0779; perilladining.co.uk)

Cooking 8.5

Service 9

Space 8.5

Score 8.67