



The Tower and the Glory

For the decade after it opened, Le Pont de la Tour was one of the princes of London restaurants, before a period in the wilderness. Now it's back. Bravo, says **EUGENE COSTELLO**

THERE IS A curious unwritten law among restaurants that once one goes off the boil and begins to ail, the decline soon becomes terminal. It's rather like those desperately sad scenes in a wildlife documentary when a mother elephant with a young calf breaks a leg, or trunk, or whatever. The herd spends a few hours with her, before ruthlessly turning its back on the mother and toddler leaving them to die as it continues its collective march on to the summer-grazing uplands. Or whatever. Heart-wrenching stuff.

And so it is with restaurants. The herd does not like to be around an ailing one. It makes it uncomfortable, embarrassed and conscious of its own mortality.

Le Pont de la Tour is one of the flagships of D&D Restaurants (along with Coq d'Argent, Launceston Place and a clutch of others... the list is impressive). When Sir Terence Conran opened it in 1991 it soon became one of London's more prestigious restaurants, with a reputation for fine dining combined with relative accessibility that many envied.

And then? No one can really put their finger on it but for some reason the punters began to desert the once-mighty temple to French fine dining. Reviews began to talk of stagnation, complacency and resting on their laurels. The whole enterprise began to feel dated and distinctly last-century.

That, we're here to tell you, has been firmly consigned to the waste-disposal unit of history. Over the past 18 months, executive chef Lee Bennett has taken the slightly tired, dated format on offer and is making Le Pont live, breathe and jump again, as Jake said to Murph and the Magic Tones in *The Blues Brothers*.

Bennett is a passionate, energetic 29-year-old from Bridlington (near Whitby on the North Yorkshire coast, where, no doubt, he began the love affair with seafood that is evident from the menu). The subtlety and sophistication of his dishes stand in contrast to the quietly forceful and determined Yorkshireman who is not one to shirk life's challenges but rather to grab them with both hands and throttle the bejaysus out of them.

After a baptism of fire in Gordon Ramsay's empire, at the age of 23 Bennett decided he wanted to do a stint in Paris

to hone his craft, despite speaking *pas un mot de français*. The three years he spent in Paris included working under the legendary Alain Ducasse at the Hotel Plaza Athénée. And when he came back to the Ramsay fold – under Marcus Wareing at the Michelin-starred Savoy Grill – a four-week temporary cover gig as acting head chef saw him gifted the coveted role at the age of just 26. Don't mess with this guy.

And on the subject of personnel, it has to be said the kitchen staff's expertise is complemented wonderfully by front-of-house. Under manager Jean-Francois Delaunay, an energetic thirtysomething Roger Federer lookalike from the Loire Valley (from a house, presumably, rather than running wild there like a gazelle, but if he told me where, I am afraid I have forgotten), the waiting staff are a revelation.

Friendly, courteous and knowledgeable, they do not display any of the snootiness one can occasionally encounter with 'fine-dining' restaurants. There is no dress policy, there is live piano and singing and if you want to sit at the bar and graze, come on down. It's all very democratic, very 'New Europe' – and very liberating.

Bag a window table if you can – the effect is like nothing so much as of being in the dining room of an ocean liner, an impression enhanced when you glance out at the aft deck, sorry, Thames walkway with white maritime-style railings at the water's edge and Tower Bridge illuminated a stone's throw from the mooring.

And so to the food. First, is it good value? Resoundingly, yes – 'rack rate' is an eminently reasonable £42.50 (though – and I'm sure they won't thank me for saying it – I did notice that you can get this for £27.50 if you book through a certain foodie website with the words top and table in its name).

And then there's the food. It's fair to say it's one of the best meals I've had in a restaurant this year, all helped no doubt by the excellent service, of course, but the food really was in a class of its own. I started with the steak tartare – served with a small raw egg, the meat exquisitely soft and tender with a good bite of horseradish. Bennett says that when he took over the mincing was done by machine (bleugh! if I want to eat raw mince I'll pick the out-of-date stuff out

of Sainsbury's bins...) Now it is all done by hand, as it should be. Some like it hot, they say, so they do bring it out with a good glug of Tabasco on the side, though I have to say, for me, the horseradish gave it sufficient warmth – why detract from the taste of the beef, after all? It really was quite exquisite...

And Bennett's signature dish is lobster bisque. The name bisque, my Uncle Wiki tells me, comes from the Bay of Biscay, though Bennett's version could just as easily come from biscuit – *bis cuit*, meaning twice cooked. For his is a double-reduction – the first fish stock is then further reduced, retaining the buttery taste and essence without making you feel you are slurping warm ghee or clarified butter, as you can sometimes with this deceptively subtle, complex soup in lesser hands. It's a triumph.

I will ensure that my next visit will also be during a month with an 'r' in it – then I will go for my second-choice starter, a selection of West Mersea rock and native oysters. These are the same ones you'll find at Richard Caring's empire (The Ivy, Le Caprice, J Sheekey) and many swear they are the best in the world – though if you're from Whitstable, Colchester or Galway, you may be excused and leave the room for a second.

For my main I kept the maritime faith – and boy, am I glad that I did. The delightful young lady attending to our every need had wisely warned us that the fruits de mer platter was bigger than my head and needed serious resolve to do it justice. I am indebted – for it meant I switched to something really special. Seared king scallops came having drawn up their circle of wagons on a lake of sage, pine nut and

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butter sauce. The scallops were seared to perfection, with just a hint of crunch while never losing the sweet tenderness that these little beauties bring. Beans and wilted spinach gave a good burst of iron and greenery that never threatened the scallop's pre-eminence as the diva for whom the punters had really paid to see perform.

Desserts are plentiful and varied. We knew we'd be having cheese – English-style after our desserts, not like les français before – so we asked for something light. And we got it, in palate-cleansing, Arctic-like freshness, in the form of a wonderfully clean green-apple iced parfait. Close to a sorbet, it was exquisite – just the right touch of sharpness, and escorted for the evening by a wonderful pear-and-cider puree.

And the cheese trolley groaned under a selection from which we chose a good, pungent and runny vacherin, a flavoursome comté, a Calvados-coated camembert and a delightful langres, a cow's milk cheese that had been washed in champagne (where it comes from, of course, like the pairing of camembert and Calvados). A hedonistic, wholly satisfying full stop to an evening of sybaritic pleasure, washed down with a slug of Dow's ten-year-old tawny. You can worry too much about gout, I always feel.

So, they turned it up to 11. Le Pont de la Tour, welcome back. Thank God rumours of your demise were greatly exaggerated. We salute you... **H**
From £60pb inc wine. Butler's Wharf, London SE1; 020 7403 8403; damdlondon.com