

» Food & Drink

It's full steam ahead to find that certain je ne sais quoi

Joseph Connolly samples Raymond Blanc's finest cuisine

» "Fon-toss-teaker ...!" is one of legendary chef Raymond Blanc's much expressed superlatives, whenever he is moved to enthusiasm. Which is often, as anyone who has seen him on television will know. And such is his media omnipresence that if you haven't seen him on television, I can only assume that you have died.

Raymond is a bon viveur in the best sense: hugely affable, and devoted to fine living and dining – more visibly and expressively moved by food than all other TV cooks, but then of course he is, as you may have detected, French. A commitment to the finest fresh produce and unceasing industry – these, to him, are the unwavering requirements of a chef. "Ze best does nert kerm izzy," he insists. "No good to be lezzy! You must fart, fart, fart all of ze way!" And which among us could argue with that?

Long before devotion to all things culinary became mandatory by law in this country, Raymond was a trailblazer. He opened Le Manoir au Quat' Saisons in Oxfordshire in 1984, in the days when his chains of brasseries and patisseries, his bestselling authorship and television stardom were not even a twinkle in his naughty little Gallic eye. As early as 1985 the restaurant had garnered two Michelin stars which have been retained for the succeeding 27 years – a pretty staggering achievement.

Delicate waltz

You will have heard of Maison Blanc – you may well have visited the outposts in Hampstead High Street and St John's Wood: very good breakfasts, light lunches and yummy cakes. There are 14 Maison Blancs – five in London – and nine Brasserie Blancs around the country. "If Le Manoir is a delicate waltz, the Brasseries are the Can-Can," says Raymond. Well zut. The empire further extends to a successful cookery school situated at Le Manoir itself, indisputably the jewel in this glittering crown.

It has long been one of those legendary restaurants that I had been meaning to visit, but never got around to – largely because we're so spoiled for good restaurants in London. And I'm lezzy! To get anywhere outside the city you have to fart, fart, fart all of ze way! Many pilgrims will stay overnight – and when you glimpse the golden honey stone of this gorgeous 17th century pile surrounded by lawns and trees winking in the sun, you wish you were not just staying the night, but living there forever. The basic room rate, though, is be-



■ Raymond Blanc with Joseph Connolly

tween £480 and £1,250 per night.

I solved the problem of how to get there by hitching a ride on the British Pullman – my very favourite train, comprising a string of gloriously restored carriages from the 1920s and 1930s, resplendent in their amber, cream and golden livery. At Victoria, you are graciously welcomed aboard by the perfectly turned out staff and escorted to your seat. Each carriage has a rather quaint name: Audrey, Lucille, Vera, Minerva ... my wife and I were in Gwen. Now I come to think of it – I'm always in Gwen. But Gwen and I, we're just good friends – and I'll take out a superinjunction if anyone implies to the contrary.

Naturally they are eager to serve you an enormous brunch, just to keep you going: a Bellini – prosecco and white peach juice, and always so welcome at 9.45 in the morning – fresh fruit salad, scrambled eggs with fine smoked salmon and potato rosti, followed by a sticky pastry. We were wise, though: just the salmon and eggs, and a vat of Laurent Perrier champagne. (On this train, it never takes long for someone to mention Murder On The Orient Express, and I mention only in passing that our personal carriage attendant went by the name of Agatha).

Luxury train trips are the exemplar of the adage that the journey not the arrival matters: the route is deliberately leisurely, though eventually you do roll up at Haddenham and Thame station, where a coach trundles you

off to Le Manoir. The two acre grounds are painfully perfect, idyllic and rather other-worldly, vaguely in the manner of Portmeirion. No fewer than 90 varieties of vegetable and 70 herbs are grown here, and soon, Raymond is to create an orchard.

The restaurant has four adjoining rooms, each with its own identity – everything from rich dark panelling and mullioned casements to conservatory brightness. We were in the latter – L'Orangerie – and because the weather was dazzlingly good, I was very content. Because of the Pullman package – the restaurant was at its full capacity of 120. The set menu was safer and less lavish than the full two Michelin star a la carte would have been, but nonetheless pretty sensational. (The carte is extremely expensive: starters £36-£40, mains not much under £50, puddings £24, cheese £20.)

Explosively fresh

We kicked off with a demitasse of intensely green wild garlic and potato soup – though maybe not as intense in actual flavour as might have been wished for – served with a perfect Parmesan biscuit. Then came a very pretty mosaic of ham hock terrine with a melting central strip of foie gras overlaid by a glistening parsley vinaigrette: very good indeed.

This was followed by a barely seared small and plump fillet of Loch Duart salmon with a nicely crunchy cucumber salad. The star event though was the roast rump of West Country lamb:

» FACT FILE

■ **LE MANOIR AU QUAT' SAISONS**
Church Road, Great Milton,
Oxfordshire OX44 7PD. Tel 01844
278847.

■ **Breakfast 7.30-10am, lunch 11.45 am-2.30pm, dinner 6.45-9.30pm.**

■ **FOOD ★★★★★★☆☆**

■ **SERVICE ★★★★★★☆☆**

■ **THE FEELING ★★★★★★☆☆**

■ **COST** A la carte about £350 for a three course meal for two with wine.

■ **The British Pullman 0845 077 2222** www.orient-express.com/uktrains

The two acre grounds are painfully idyllic and rather other-worldly, vaguely in the manner of Portmeirion

this had superb flavour, and the peas, asparagus and beans from the garden were explosively fresh: you very rarely taste that. The wines, too, were more than decent: a properly crisp riesling from Alsace, and a solidly fruity Roussillon. Then we had small quatres – or petits fours, as the French will have it. What ...? No pud ...? Oh yes – but this was served during the return journey on the train: a trio of puds, in fact – fudge cake with butterscotch sauce, apple and rhubarb cider jelly, and a tiny wedge of pickled rhubarb in a perfectly light puff pastry caselet. And a further vat of Laurent Perrier champagne.

The bonus for the women on the trip was the presence at Le Manoir of Raymond Blanc himself! Rather impressive, actually, as the night before he had been partying in London at the Tatler Restaurant Awards bash. They squealed, these women. They did. And queued for ages to meet the great man and get their menus signed. I asked him what it felt like to be The Beatles. He grinned and hugged me, beaming uncontrollably. "Aw ...! Fon-toss-teaker ...!"

» Wine with Liz Sagues



■ Carluccio's wine buyer, Mike Stocks, tastes the wines on offer at Carluccio's
Picture: Nigel Sutton

Enjoy a taste and class of Venice in the comfort of Carluccio's this summer

July isn't the best month to visit Venice – it's far too hot for enjoyable strolling and the crowds of day trippers are overwhelming. Instead, stay at home and enjoy the experience in a glass.

While Venice itself – or, rather, its outlying islands – does produce wine, it's yet to reach the UK (see www.venissa.it), so I'm talking of the Veneto, the productive area just inland. And that's the focus of the current wine festival in Carluccio's caffès and delis (until the end of July in Hampstead, Muswell Hill, St John's Wood, Brent Cross).

While much of the output of the Veneto's 90,000-plus hectares of vineyards is rather less distinguished than Venissa – think lakes of watery valpolicella – the region is Italy's largest producer of wine which meets DOC quality standard. So UK wine trade buyers prepared to select with care can bring in wines which are at least reliable, at best very impressive.

Tempting

Mike Stocks is one of them. At university he worked part-time for Thresher, where access to staff discounts won him "lots of friends", then on a year out from his law studies he became a barista at Carluccio's. He stayed, and almost 12 years on is in charge of sourcing the company's wine. For the current festival, there are 13 new Veneto wines on sale in the delis, plus two extra special ones limited to those who lunch or dine at Carluccio's. The drinking-in formula is tempting: choose any wine from the shelf and simply pay £5 corkage.

What of the wines? Those I tried are appealing, with the food-friendliness for which Italy is justly renowned. The only existing regular (the

newcomers could continue after the festival, depending on customer reaction and availability) is Ruggiero Santo Stefano prosecco (£14.95), with gentle fizz and a pleasant pre-meal touch of sweetness.

Lower in the price ladder is pink Bertarose where merlot is mixed with indigenous molinero (£8.95), bursting with vinous flavour and crunchy freshness. Family grower Bertani also delivers with three other wines I tasted – a classic Soave, Seosole 2010, with character and complexity, juicy Bardolino 2010 where there's a pleasant sour cherry edge and good length (both £10.50) and a restrained yet rich and spicy Amarone, Villa Arvedi 2007 (£30).

Exceptional

The stars are the two wines you can't buy to take home. Even at the £25 drinking-in price (or by the glass, £8.50/£5.95) the value is exceptional. They come from highly-respected grower Roberto Anselmi, something of a maverick – his whites are essentially Soave but his disapproval of the appellation organisation is such that he quit it very publicly and now the label is simply geographical.

The white, San Vincenzo 2010 (garganega, trebbiano, a touch of chardonnay) is stylish: complex, aromatic and long.

I didn't have the heart to accept Stocks' offer to open a bottle of the single-vineyard cabernet sauvignon Realda 2008 – the whole production is being rapidly downed by Carluccio's customers, and those in the St John's Wood caffè one lunchtime last week must have already been aghast at the number of bottles open on our table for two.

■ www.carluccios.com.