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The buzz is back

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If 2006 has left this restaurant correspondent feeling more than replete and grateful for the job he fell into by chance 17 years ago, it has also been a good year for the restaurant trade.

This year has seen stronger demand, greater interest and, most important, a higher spend than any other. A combination of strong economies on either side of the Atlantic, greater, often excessive global interest in chefs and what they get up to and an increasing, if unfortunate, reluctance on the part of many to cook and eat at home has meant 2006 was a year many in the industry would like to see repeated.

Two brief examples of just how good business has been will suffice. The first was a phone call from Michel Roux, chef/proprietor at the three-star Michelin restaurant The Waterside Inn in Bray to the FT's wine correspondent, asking her to point him in the direction of a wine merchant who could supply magnums of mature red Burgundy and Bordeaux. These invariably expensive bottles have been selling so well that his cellar needs replenishing.

The second took place on a Monday evening in the private room at The Square in Mayfair, where I was part of the after-dinner entertainment for a group of fund managers. Before I spoke about restaurants in general, however, I asked them to be quiet and listen to the buzz in the restaurant next door. On supposedly the quietest night of the week, the place was jumping.

But, happily, this level of demand has not been restricted to only the most expensive restaurants. My black plastic box, which acts not just as a repository for all my favourite menus but an invaluable support for a less than infallible memory, is also full of menus from great value restaurants in various cities around the world that I wouldn't hesitate to return to at a moment's notice.

For sheer fun, there's the paper menu/placemat from Cuines Santa Caterina, next to the food market of the same name in food-obsessed Barcelona. That meal was followed by a wonderful dinner at the more formal Cinc Sentis, run by the Artal family. Then there is the postcard from Bistrot Paul Bert in Paris, which I reviewed so enthusiastically last week. The card has to serve as a memento as the menu only appears on a portable blackboard.

There is, happily, a plethora of good value menus across England (I confess to being remiss

in regard to Scotland and Wales during 2006). Menus from Arbutus in Soho, which Anthony Demetre and Will Smith opened last summer, probably figure more than those from any other restaurant but it is only geography that prevents me from heading back to Barny Haughton's environmentally friendly Bordeaux Quay or Stephen Markwick's low-key Culinaria, both in Bristol, Roger Jones's The Harrow at Little Bedwyn, near Marlborough, or Ian Bates's The Old Spot, which backs on to the square by Wells Cathedral in Somerset. And the journey from north to south London is the only factor preventing me from eating more often at Bruce Poole's Chez Bruce in Wandsworth.

The much longer journeys around Australia from Sydney to Queensland, Adelaide and Melbourne resulted in a stack of menus and wine lists and the unforgettable memory of one dish in particular, a first course called Millionaires salad, served at NuNu's restaurant across from the beach at Palm Cove, north of Cairns. For only A\$20 (£8), this salad brought me my first taste of fresh, local hearts of palm whose distinctive texture was enhanced by slices of honeydew melon, chillies, lime and herbs as, clad in shorts and T-shirts, we tried to keep warm as an unseasonably cold wind blew in from across the ocean no more than 20m away.

Highlights from our stay in Sydney included braised beef cheek pie at Bird Cow Fish; noodles at Sailors Thai; lunches at Fratelli Fresh and Icebergs overlooking Bondi Beach and dinner at Rockpool. Melbourne responded equally impressively with coffee at the atmospheric Pellegrinis, lunches at the Flower Drum and Vue de Monde and dinner at 312. In between came a trip to the Hunter Valley and a quintessentially French lunch at Robert's in the heart of the Australian vineyards.

All this was spread over almost a month but for anyone planning a shorter, European tour that takes in just as many good value restaurants and a much bigger slice of classic art, then I can only urge any reader to follow the Po Valley westward from Venice to Milan. While there are more than enough guide books to lead you to the galleries and churches en route, this journey would also reveal the pleasures of eating at Il Vecio Fritolin and Alle Testiere in Venice, Per Bacco in Padua, Ristorante Max in Ferrara and the opportunity, before you plunge into Milan, to make as long a stop as you can possibly afford at La Crepa in Isola Davorese.

Two trips to New York afforded insights into how the restaurant industry will develop as large-scale investment meets restaurateurs and chefs with similar horizons as exemplified at Megu, Morimoto, Buddakan and Del Posto. On a slightly more refined level, I was impressed by what Dan Barber is cooking at Blue Hill at Stone Barns, the dishes emanating from the seemingly reinvigorated Jean-Georges Vongerichten at Perry Street and the extraordinary combination of the enormous wine lists on offer at Cru alongside the robust cooking of Shea Gallante.

Finally, this bout of apparent self-indulgence has yielded two far more altruistic wishes for the restaurant industry and restaurant goers. The first is that as many as possible would eat at the counter at any of the six Joël Robuchon Ateliers that now exist worldwide and appreciate just how much better food tastes the shorter the distance it has to travel from the

kitchen.

The second is that anyone interested in hospitality and looking after their fellow men and women reads Danny Meyer's recently published book, *Setting the Table: The Transforming Power of Hospitality in Business* (HarperCollins). Written by the restaurateur I most admire, this book encapsulates why this business can be so demanding, frustrating and exhausting but, in the right hands, why it can also be more immediately rewarding and satisfying than any other.

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