

Chef makes it a French revolution

The new French chef at The Regent Kowloon Hotel is waiting to be put to the test, writes **Donna Mongan**

JUST last week, I was asked on three separate occasions, why it is that the majority of food reviews in *The Sunday Standard* are positive ones.

It is quite easy to explain: If I spent each week writing about all the places I have been which have an impressive food and sub-standard service, I wouldn't have time to concentrate on the enjoyable ones.

And, as many readers are either here for a short while or have not time or inclination to explore failures, I consider standards and value for money with them in mind. With straight reviews, a place is visited two, maybe three times, to be absolutely sure.

Oddly, it's not often that hotel restaurants are considered as "cheap" places to eat as there is a misconception that they cost more. But not so in Hongkong. As there is so much competition, hotel meals are on par with private. And, take it from me, the service has to be better.

Of late I have been watching the French return to Hongkong with a vengeance. This week I've focused on Paul Pairet of the Regal Kowloon Hotel.

Now, these artistic types can be so temperamental. Pairet's countenance has a lean and hungry look, of someone who spent time starving in a garret. You can just tell he has gone through a lot of creative pain in his life.

As he is quite the turn-of-the-century artist, he admits that he feels quite tortured if his signature leaves are left unglorified with a flick of oil, or if the essential circumference of dots, which embellishes many of his dishes, are a fraction of a millimetre unequal in their configuration.

Such attention to detail has had some kitchen staff pulling their hair out by the roots.

"That's perfectionism, I'm sorry. I will not take anything less," Pairet said with obvious masochistic pleasure. If that's Paul Pairet for you at 29, can you imagine how he must have been when, as he told me, he was worse six years ago.

"I knew then I had what it takes to be one of the best," he said. "Some very, very good chefs I know have doubts about their abilities and are happy to amble through with mediocrity in kitchens. I am not one of them."

The Regal Kowloon should consider itself lucky that it has snared someone so dedicated to his profession.

Pairet has brought with him the most current of Paris food fashion — creations redolent of *nouvelle cuisine*, in as much as they are quite stylised, but with a robustness which gives diners their money's worth, an attitude which Parisiennes have always taken seriously.

So in this way, *Le Restaurant de France*, of the rich velvets and bronze cherubim, and Pairet, with his Parisienne air, are somehow attuned to one another.

While on the subject of the decor — which to my mind, is certainly the most attractive of dining rooms of the Regal's Hongkong hotels — I have to mention the ceiling's series of stained glass leadwork, which were commissioned by Paul Bocuse to one of the few ateliers, from Halluin, France, which still specialise in the craft.

Le Restaurant de France was conceptualised by Bocuse, the pioneer of *nouvelle cuisine*, and holder of the Legion of Honour for his services to France and food, in 1982. Famed French gastronomic publication *Gault-Millau* awarded the restaurant the title of the Best Western Restaurant in Hongkong back in 1989.

For some reason, perhaps the French falling from favour, it has had a chequered popularity since then. Pairet arrived in Hongkong about three months



PAIRET: His attention to detail has had kitchen staff pulling their hair out.

ago, around the same time as the Holiday Inn Crowne Plaza's chef of The Belvedere, Serge Barckel.

Although they didn't know each other in France, they have struck up a camaraderie — and a vow to put French cuisine back on top. But the difference in characters and cooking styles are extreme, and on this Pairet gives a little quarter.

"We both grew up for this work. We love it. We want it. We want to make a difference in Hongkong," Pairet said passionately. "And because our styles are different... we leave the choice to the tastes of our customers."

Pairet, originally from Marseilles in France's south, has achieved a great deal in his short life. After completing training at the hoteliers management university in Toulouse, he quickly found his niche in establishments *La Bourgogne*, *La Maison Blanche* and *La Grace de Dieu*, Michelin star holders all.

To get a broad picture of his food, I chose the *table d'hôte*, at \$96 per person, with one substitution, the *entremet de crevettes tabbouleh en surprise*, a full moon of seafood tabbouleh for the roll of smoked and fresh salmon rillettes.

A tailor-made executive lunch menu for \$158, and a set dinner of appetiser, main course and dessert for \$280, which should suit diners with a variety of pocket sizes.

My choice included a duck soup, introducing the first of Pairet's multi-level structures. Yes, a multi-level soup, with three delightful textures of consommé, lentils and a foamy duck liver.

With Pairet virtually nothing is spread over a plate but arranged in rather complicated sculptures, rising in embellished towers. Then, *rolda*, the lamb — a

roasted shank wrapped in caramelised tomatoes and eggplant — is *solt-taire*.

Most often though, the ingredients are stacked so tastes are already combined; you eat down into rather than over them.

One of my dining companions chose the snails "gift-wrapped" in brick or filo pastry, served with a beef juice and lemongrass, an infinitesimal hint of the Orient.

Respectfully, it is when he recalls his South of France, when he thrusts aside all the drama for a less formal, more hot-blooded fare that he really gets firing.

The seafood tabbouleh recalls and recaptures the essence of Morocco and the Moors, while the roasted turbot with a complex combination of creamed and crisped potatoes flavoured with olive oil is unabashedly Mediterranean.

I had a sneaked helping from the main list of gigantic, caramelised king prawns with a bush of shredded potato.

With this I again chose to drink a Pouilly-Fuisse, the Regal Kowloon's current house white wine, as this seems to me the essential white for autumn food, but also cornered a whole bottle of burgundy *Chateau de Tours 1986* off the wine list.

The prices on the list are generally up to \$50 cheaper per bottle than a few other establishments of the same calibre.

Pairet was a bit picky about the standard of the berries available at the moment. But the vermillion-hued pastryless fruit tart, with mathematically placed cream dots, just went to confirm Pairet's status as an impressive all-rounder.

How he fares in Hongkong, though, only time will tell. Some of the latest arrivals, be they French or otherwise, will no doubt end up stars here and others may end up heading back to Europe where they feel they are "better appreciated".

It will be their customers, and hotel and restaurant managements who will ultimately decide.

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