

The Young Ones

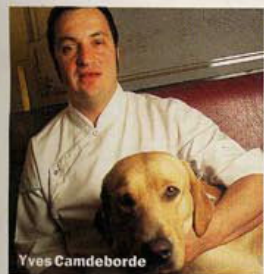
Alexander Lobrano samples the inventive cooking of Paris' trend-setting young chefs.

Paris may be starting to take a wok on the wild side with fusion cuisine, but the city's most promising young chefs continue to express themselves through imaginative reworkings of traditional bistro cooking. France's diverse regional cuisines and outstanding produce remain their most vital sources of inspiration.

Particularly noteworthy among the new crop of talent are Pierre Jay at **L'Ardoise** and Christophe Beaufort at **L'Avant Gout**. Both trained at haute cuisine temples before bringing imagination and refinement to bistro cooking. Beaufort's menu at his noisy, crowded place near the place d'Italie ranges from the classic, as in a delicious tomato stuffed with oxtail, served with tiny cheese-filled *raclettes*, to the truly original in *giblette* (a type of mullet) with deep-fried ginger and preserved vegetables. Unexpected garnishes make his dishes a visual treat.

Pierre Jay trained at La Tour d'Argent and now runs an excellent contemporary bistro with a first-rate 170F menu. Typical of Jay's originality is a salad of crunchy squid and langoustines in a blanch of finely grated carrot and celery with a gently gingered, Oriental-style dressing. 'Bistro cooking lends itself to invention,' says Jay. 'Just by changing the seasoning you can add a new signature to a traditional dish. I also think it's more interesting to use expensive products for garnishes, as I do, than to cook whole dishes of costly foods like langoustines or morel mushrooms.'

Inspired by the roaring success of contemporary *prix-fixe* bistros like Yves Camdeborde's **La Régale** and François Pastéau's **L'Épi**



Yves Camdeborde

Dupin, this idiom continues to attract young chefs keen to go out on their own, with an ongoing flowering of first-rate new addresses. Young chef Philippe Duclos and his brother François have opened **Le Buisson Ardent**, a popular bistro with a pretty Art Deco décor in the 5th. A student of Alain Senderens at Lucas Carton and Jacques Cagna, Duclos does dishes like crab ravioli in lemon-grass-scented *bouillon* and veal kidney with wild mushrooms.

Many young chefs have returned to their roots to add originality to their bistro menus. Alain Carrère, chef at the new and very good **Le Pamphlet** in the Marais, uses chorizo sausage to cleverly season scallops, revealing his Basque-Bearnaise origins. Several of the unusual dishes offered by Thierry Breton at the thriving **Chez Michel** and its adjacent annex, **Chez Casimir**, near Gare du Nord, are actually Breton. Indeed, some of the city's rising stars are making their reputations entirely on a bold reworking of a provincial cuisine. Flora Mekula, one of the rare up-and-coming female chefs in Paris, is from Avignon; at **Les Olivades** in the 7th, she does superb Provençal dishes like quail *confit* and red mullet with *poutargue* (pressed mullet roe).

Beyond the bistro, Paris now has noteworthy fusion cooks. One of the best is Paul Pairet at the sleek **Café Mosaïc** near the Champs-Élysées, where the décor's colonial inspiration has been

'Bistro cooking lends itself to invention...'

planned down to a warm and fashionable minimalism. The inventive menu reflects the peripatetic career of Pairet, a native of Toulouse who worked with Robuchon and José Lampreia (founding chef of La Maison Blanche) before cooking for several years in Hong Kong, Sydney and Jakarta. Starters like shrimps steamed in a clay jar with lemon and dill and served with soya, Bearnaise and *nuoc mam* sauces, and main courses such as lamb shank with apricots and a sesame and chicken cream demonstrate his nuanced approach to creating a self-described 'cuisine de voyage', a stylish hybrid where east meets west with dramatic presentations.

Due to the substantial investment necessary to make an haute cuisine debut, Paris is not often treated to new talent at this most exalted level of the food chain. Many luxury restaurants and haute cuisine chefs are now being financed by



Christophe Le Squer

large corporations. Thus, bright new talent Christophe Le Squer, who has recently taken over at **L'edoyen**, is an employee of Vivendi, the huge waterworks and media conglomerate that owns the restaurant. Bernard Loiseau, a three-star chef from Saulieu in Burgundy, tried to float his restaurant in 1988 but – perhaps wary after the high-publicity bankruptcy of Pierre Gagnaire (now in business again) – the markets reacted tepidly.

Working for a corporate parent has the advantages of deep pockets but the constraints of showing a good turnover. So far it looks auspicious for Le Squer, whose style privileges simplicity and quality produce. On Le Squer's menu (as at Alain Ducasse and Pierre Gagnaire), dishes are first identified by their simple name – beef, chicken, sole, etc – and the cooking method follows as a subtitled explanation, making the

point that what counts most is the quality of the main ingredient.

Is there a way for the next generation of talent to win the professional recognition, creative satisfaction, and gilded clientele of haute cuisine without corporate sponsorship? One

young Paris chef seems to be showing the way forward: Eric Frechon at his **Restaurant Eric Frechon**. Though he's located in the unfashionable 19th *arrondissement*, Frechon has no problem pulling a chauffeured, fur-coats crowd to his former café space for superb modern dishes, such as pig's trotter salad in coriander dressing or Moroccan-inspired langoustine *pastilla*. Frechon has been on his own for almost three years, and during this time he has been steadily refining his menu to create what almost constitutes a new genre of festive yet affordable, earthy yet delicate food that falls somewhere between traditional bistro cooking and classic haute cuisine. It's from this delicious new territory, which other young talents like David Van Laer at **Le Maxence** and Alain Solivères at **Les Elysées** are also exploring, that the next great restaurants of Paris are likely to emerge.

Critics' Choice

Macéo (1st)

Sophisticated and witty.

Le Maxence (6th)

Inventive regional French food.

Café Mosaïc (8th)

Original food in a zen space.

Contemporary

For an innovative fix or a fashionable feed, try one of these up-to-the-minute restaurants.

Café Mosaïc

46 av George V, 8th (01.47.20.18.09).

M^o George V. Open daily 8am-10.30pm.

Average 250F, Lunch menu 180F, 220F.

Credit AmEx, DC, MC, V. Wheelchair

access.

World-roving chef Paul Pairet, who trained with Robuchon and the late José Lampreia of La Maison Blanche before cooking in Hong Kong and Sydney, offers a truly original and generally very good menu at this attractive, Zen-like space a few steps off the Champs.

Sleek beige linen, sober leather-backed chairs, a dark-stained wood floor and wrought-iron lamps with caramel-coloured shades are a perfect backdrop for tasty, amusingly presented dishes. Snails come stuffed into an upright marrow bone, and scallops, cooked with soya sauce and star anise, are served in their shells, which are held shut with clothes pins. Good main courses include a delicious veal chop with a crust of almonds and parmesan and lacquered herring with a sauce of dill-spiked sheep's cheese. Desserts are unusual, too: tapioca and preserved raspberries garnish a lemon sabayon. Pleasant service and the white Corbières and Côtes du Rhône Rasteau are good bets from a pricey list. Note that they also serve breakfast and afternoon tea.