



THE GANNET

merci for the memories

French fine dining may be under fire, but it's putting up a fabulous fight at Le Clarence in Paris – a reassuring remembrance of gloriously opulent things repast

You don't know what you've got till it's gone, as Joni Mitchell once sagely warbled. As the *ancien régime* of French gastronomy comes under ever heavier fire from the *enfants terribles* of another *nouvelle vague*, and spotless white tablecloths, guéridons, duck presses and red velvet are consigned to the *poubelle* of culinary history, The Gannet cannot but feel a touch of nostalgia for *les arts de la table*.

My most recent bout of wistfulness was over lunch at Paris's gloriously opulent,

two-Michelin-starred Le Clarence, a Proustian moment provoked by the ethereal smell of a fish being filleted: 20 years ago, one of my first great meals was at Restaurant Guy Savoy, where the waiter filleted a whole John Dory at my table, plated it for two, and anointed it with a buttery sauce, all without soiling his cuffs.

The seabass provoked a Proustian moment

Under the crystal chandeliers of Le Clarence, the fish in question was a wild seabass, baked in a thick salt crust to trap its natural aromas, which flooded out as *monsieur* gave the crust judicious taps with the back of a spoon. Matched with a raviolo of wild mushroom and a layered terrine of foie gras, it was sensational.

Le Clarence, with its exquisitely decorated rooms, grand staircase and wine-stuffed cellars, recalls a grand *hôtel particulier* in Bordeaux: deliberately, since its president and CEO is Prince Robert of

Luxembourg, great-grandson of the eponymous Clarence Dillon, a fabulously wealthy Texas banker who, in 1935, purchased Château Haut-Brion. Vintages from that historic estate, and its equally legendary sister property, Château La Mission Haut-Brion, are on sale downstairs and, *naturellement*, take pride of place on the restaurant wine list.

Le Clarence feels as though it has been there forever: in fact, it opened three years ago. The owner's canniest move was to engage the services of Christophe Pelé at the stoves: formerly of the much-praised La Bigarrade, in the 17^{ème}, he has a rare intelligence and a fine grasp of flavour (pictured, from the current menu, cuttlefish with artichoke and nasturtium).

On my visit, lunch started with amuses-bouches in the second-floor salon: the lightest of Comté gougères; barbajuans – beautifully blistered Monégasque pastries stuffed with Swiss chard; and whelks in the shell with a tarragon-spiked sauce tartare.

Then to the table: scallops three ways – roasted, with celeriac “cake” and anchovy; raw, with a sorrel emulsion and a tonnato sauce; and wrapped in Bigorre ham with avocado cream. Next, sweet little mussels on the half-shell (Pelé has a masterful touch with shellfish) scattered with coriander; after that, magnificent seafood and roe-deer fillet with artichoke and béarnaise. And I would return for the cheeseboard alone.

My advice is to go, enjoy and splash out: with the proviso that one of those splashes is Château Haut-Brion 1995. **BILL KNOTT**

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