



Chef's Table Delivers Unique Experience

Like all brilliant ideas, having dinner in the kitchen is really a very simple one – after all, many people do so at home, it's just that virtually nobody ever did it in a restaurant before. The idea turned out to be a big hit, as many restaurant guests turned out to be rather curious about what goes on in a famous restaurant's kitchen. *Pierre Wynants* (*Comme Chez Soi*, Brussels) put four tables in his kitchen, and The Hague's *Corona* (at the time ran by *Robert Kranenburg* and holder of one star) was the first star restaurant to adopt the idea. In 1990 the InterContinental Amstel Amsterdam was extensively refurbished, and when it arose, phoenix-like, from the brick dust, Kranenburg's kitchen had a chef's table (an idea of *Thomas Schmitt*, who was second in command at the time).

Therefore, at the start of this summer, we visited the hotel on Professor Tulp plein to see for ourselves – something we never got round to during the past seventeen years.

Restaurant La Rive has always held a special place in my heart, not least because in '92 I had the privilege of being one of its first 'test eaters'. Since additional guests were actually welcomed at the time, I brought along my dear grandmother, who has since passed on. Even she – born in 1909 – was delighted to dine at this renewed icon of the Dutch capital.



A visit to La Rive is different from one to any other restaurant, beginning with the 1867 hotel's trusty doormen, who nodding and smiling give the revolving door a little push. Then there is the beautifully laid marble, the stairway with its sun clock, balustrades and porter's lodge, and the gentle, slightly yellow light entering the "grand hall" (surely a classier term than "lobby"?). Our coats were taken, after which a neatly uniformed employee asked if he may lead us to the restaurant. Naturally, he may. At a leisurely pace we walk towards the glass lounge, with its view of the Amstel river, where in the afternoon a classy and very extensive afternoon tea is served.

La Rive is on a level with the Amstel, so we take the stairs down, where we are welcomed by maître d' *Ronald Opten*, who takes us to the kitchen, where we are expected. Although small changes have been made to the restaurant since 1992, it still exudes the same classical, respectable atmosphere.

Stiff Service?

Some people feel that dinner at the Amstel Hotel must be a stiff and rather formal affair. That is a prejudice I cannot gainsay forcefully enough. Of course there is something *chic* and prestigious about La Rive, but every time I cannot help but notice that the restaurant's serving staff succeeds at making the

guests (i.e. me) feel good, particularly by not acting stiffly, but rather hitting a fine balance between friendliness, flexibility (not to be confused with servility) and a degree of personal involvement. People like Ronald Opten (a master gastronome) and trusted sommelier *Ted Bunnik* seem to bear their responsibilities effortlessly.

Positioned right in the middle of the kitchen, behind the office (the chef's little "island", where all the administrative tasks are done) put there in the French manner, between the patisserie, cold kitchen and banqueting kitchen, the chef's table offers a stupendous view of the goings-on in one of the country's best kitchen's. Chef *Rogér Rassin* shakes our hand and welcomes us cordially, after which the fun can begin.



The view...

Bagna cauda

Maître d' Ronald Opten takes excellent care of us all night, adding a little explanation to every dish. The amuse-bouches do not fail to impress: krupuk of Parmesan cheese and tapioca, pillows with Parmesan cheese and Hawaiian salt, and so-called grissini sticks with Jabugo ham (the finest there is). Added to this a cone of curry and tuna tartare, Dutch herring with sweet-and-sour cucumber and herring roe. Another delicacy was the chef's tomato, peeled, marinated and caramelised to the point of crispiness. What flavour!

The final amuse-bouche before the actual dinner took place was a (coated) deep-fried sardine, placed upright in a bowl of *bagna cauda* (literally: a hot bath), which is a sauce based on anchovy, garlic and olive, used in Italy for dipping fish and vegetables. Delicious!

Wagyu

First, Rogér Rassin served a tartare of the finest and tastiest meat imaginable – wagyu. This Japanese-style meat is imported exclusively by the specialized Amsterdam company *Nice to Meat* and comes from cows that were pampered in America with the best feed, brush massages and... *beer!* In some cow houses in Japan they even play classical music to improve the animals' wellbeing. Wagyu beef is strongly veined and contains a high degree of fat, meaning it's extremely tender. The fat is essential for its flavour (as meat without fat is virtually flavourless), and fortunately it consists of healthy types of fat, to which many positive effects are ascribed.



Wagyu tartare à la Rassin

Anyway, Rog r composed a work of art consisting of the sirloin tartare, with a crispy Parmesan wafer on top and a roll of celeriac foam, accompanied by creations of duck liver, Jerusalem artichoke, spice galettes and a bowl of oxtail in its own gravy. Ted Bunnik must have realized that the first blow is half the battle, presenting us with a *Riesling Auslese Wiltinger braune Kupp 1989 Vereinigte Hospitien*. That's right: a twenty-year-old Riesling! Of the 'goût de petrol' that occasionally marks older Rieslings, there was no trace. It was a fine wine and a perfect match for the chef's dish.

We observe the goings-on and listen to the announcements made at the start of the evening: "Two langoustines, one ray, one sweetbread and a wagyu!", we hear. Sous-chef *Frank van Thiel* (formerly of De Librije) also shows up and enthusiastically explains some of the kitchen processes to us.

For the next dish, monkfish, the sommelier comes up with another very special wine: a 2006 *Naiades* from *Bodegas Naia* (Rueda, Spain), which is a verdejo-c page with a very pronounced, amiable character. Once again it is exquisitely matched by the perfectly fried pieces of monkfish and a composition of green pandang rice with a few small but very tasty bouchot mussels on top, a little European squid and a crispy biscuit made of parts of that squid. There was also a stalk of fennel, some dollops of cream of pandang rice, tasty mini bok choy and some citrus *jus* based on lemongrass. Words fail us.

Sea bass 'en cro te'

Then we notice that the chef is working on an impressively large dish with what seems like a kind of long, grey cake on it. This turns out to be the jacket for a sea bass weighing more than a kilo, which has been cooked in the oven at 165 degrees Celsius in sea salt. The result is a dish for two people, which is ordered several times that night. Ronald Opten does the filleting at the table.



Ronald Opten with sea bass 'en croûte'

There's more fish for us. To be exact: a delicately fried piece of ray wing with almond cream, a piece of artichoke heart, mini cucumber (with flower), glasswort, some morels and *beurre noisette* with mustard. Absolutely delicious! Once again, Ted manages to surprise us with something Austrian and beautiful. "It's an impossible bottle, as it won't fit in the fridge," Ted complains smilingly, "but the contents are fantastic!" That's no overstatement. Its vintner, Hirtzberger, is known as one of Austria's finest and created something truly divine with his 2002 *Grüner Veltliner 'Rotes Tor', Smaragd*. Gorgeous and unforgettable!

No French Fries

Seated as we are at the best place in the kitchen, there is never a dull moment, and there's even time for a chat with Richard Matulesky, head of the hotel and banqueting kitchen, which is a clearly separated department. Everything prepared in the northern part of the kitchen goes to parties, room service, the *brasserie* or, for example, the lounge or the very pleasant terrace. Tonight, there's a lot of entrecotes going upstairs, accompanied by bags of French fries. Not knowing what chef Rogér's reaction would be, we don't dare ask Richard for French fries, but they look very appetizing. "We make our fries in three stages," Richard explains. "First we steam them and cool them, then they are pre-fried and cooled again, and only then do they get deep-fried properly. The result is a soft inside and a wonderfully crispy outside."



At the side of La Rive, a string of beautiful dishes passes by: beautiful plates with slices of wagyu, followed by another dish, based on langoustine.



As is our next dish, although in a different way: it is wrapped in crispy Mediterranean *kataifi* dough (which gets spelled in all sorts of ways and the extraordinary production of which is delightfully documented on YouTube). The langoustine is placed inside a ring of pureed green peas with a little lobster gravy in the middle. Cubes of Granny Smith elevate the flavour, while pea cress and a violet add an artistic touch. Another exceptionally delicious dish, especially accompanied by a 2007 *Domaine de La Laidiere*, a rosé from the Bandol region.

Lamb and Tears

While a trolley of impressive desserts from the patisserie passes us by (loaded with raspberries, cherries, macarons and other sweet temptations), people are hard at work at our main course. Ted Bunnik almost brings a tear to our eyes with a prestigious and very memorable glass of Pomerol from the vineyard of the Right Honourable barons of Rothschild (long may they live!): a 2003 *Blason de L'Evangile*. In a sense this is the *Château de l'Evangile's* "second wine", assembled from barrels of "grand vin" and therefore of a similar character, but as it has spent a mere 15 months on two-year-old barrels, it has to be drunk earlier. "Not something we really mind, is it?" Ted remarks jokingly.



Ted Bunnik holding the impressive *Blason de l'Evangile*

Even without the lamb, this wine is something special, but nevertheless we wouldn't have wanted to miss that (served in proper style with a nice and sharp Laguiole knife). Our plate featured a roasted piece of back, together with a chop gratin and a braised piece of shoulder. The delicious flavours were based on eggplant, paprika, Raz El Hanout spices and the lamb's own gravy. All in all, another delightful experience.

The time has come to depart the kitchen. We try to pretend that we were not impressed, but I physically cannot manage to pull off that bit of acting. So the chef gets a kiss from my companion and we thank the white brigade for an unforgettable evening.

Seated in comfortable chairs, we savour the last moments at La Rive and enjoy the atmosphere of the restaurant, where the cheese trolley is waiting for us. Maître d' Ronald gives us a taste of some fine Dutch farmhouse cheese, which is yet another delight to the taste buds. But there is more splendid cheese, affinated by the Alsatian "maître fromager" *Bernard Anthony*. Would we like a small plate featuring some complementary flavours? Yes, please! How about a glass of *Pommeau de Normandie*? Yum!

Over dessert (raspberries in various textures, with white-chocolate mousse, salted crumbly pastry and a delicious glass of *Botrytis Semillon 2007* of the Australian house of *Elderton*) we chat with Ronald Opten, who has been working at La Rive since last year. He came up with an attractive new house style for the menu and agrees with the chef that the restaurant is now at a level that took his former employers (De Vrienden van Jacob) seven years to attain. This is cause for satisfaction. He is also happy with the number of guests the restaurant attracts. "In June we were at the same level as last year, which is not bad in times like these. My expectations are good..."

By the end of the evening we admit to being deeply impressed by this experience. Rogér Rassin seems perfectly at home here, driven to even greater heights of culinary creativity than before at Cordial. The team work with the serving staff can be called phenomenal. The duo of Rassin & Opten excels!

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