

THE BISTRO STRIKES BACK

After a decade in the doldrums the French bistro has enjoyed a mini-renaissance and is once again a force to be reckoned with

In the 1990s French restaurants found themselves in something of a culinary cul de sac. The high-end had irked the public with nouvelle cuisine and starchy, grandiose service, while the traditional bistro looked old hat compared to a new wave of sophisticated Italian and fusion restaurants.

It's taken 20-odd years, but finally the bistro seems to be experiencing something of a revival. Prompted by a clutch of top-end London independents - and bolstered by a number of new casual dining concepts - the UK restaurant-goer is rediscovering French food again.

It is a comeback long overdue: for too long the sector's middle market offerings were, in the main, woefully poor. High-end French cuisine was perceived as dated, overly rich and excessively formal. Trends in the independent restaurant sector soon filtered down to the chain market. As a result, casual diners gorged on Asian and, in particular, Italian staples instead.

So while the likes of Wagamama, Strada and Pizza Express flourished, Pierre Levicky's 147-strong French bistro concept Pierre Victoire collapsed. Somehow, Café Rouge and the Paramount-owned Gérard concepts weathered the storm, in part because they were comparatively young, vibrant groups. But no new French chains would emerge for a decade.

"There was very little when we opened our first Côte back in 2007, the market was desperately under served," recalls Andy Basadone, founder of the 23-strong (and growing) bistro chain. "There's a

Words
Joe Lutrario

long association with the British and French food and I still think it's under-represented now, although London is moving in the right direction."

Basadone believes it was the success of high-profile restaurants like Henry Harris's Racine and Galvin Bistrot de Luxe - two outfits that revel in classic bistro dishes - that paved the way for what would become a renaissance in rustic Gallic cuisine, now joined by the likes of Terroirs, Bistro Bruno Loubet and, most recently, Chabrot.

Unsurprisingly, the mid-market sector has followed suit and bounced back too. Côte has expanded at a staggering rate, northern-based Le Bistrot Pierre is up to nine units, Brasserie Blanc plans to open up to four new sites a year and MWB Holdings - operator of Hotel du Vin - is rolling out a standalone bistro concept called Bistro du Vin. North of the border, Pierre Levicky has even partly resuscitated his empire, with three units in Edinburgh and more to come.

But in comparison to the big Italian chains and

mainstream Asian operators such as Wagamama and Yo! Sushi, the current French bistro concepts remain somewhat small-fry. That means there's still potential for growth, although not to the same degree as the pizza merchants.

"Italian food has been embraced by the UK consumer to a much greater extent than French. It's not surprising that Italian casual dining formats are more commonplace," explains Graham Turner, chief executive of Café Rouge's parent company, Tragus Holdings. "However, French food has great appeal for the UK consumer and its position continues to grow."

The fundamental economics of the foodstuffs involved also preclude bistros being as omnipresent as their Mediterranean cousins. "The profitability of the Italian offer is boosted by pasta and pizza and there's simply no equivalent in French cuisine," says Brasserie Blanc managing director John Lederer. "We deal in a more expensive product and, sadly, it is very difficult to go down to high-street level without compromising on food quality."

PRIX FIXING

With most other chain operators offering discounts, the reality is that most of the branded French players need a presence on deal websites and local and national media to compete for price-sensitive custom.

But the discounting mechanisms are necessarily different. By and large, the bistro boys discount less aggressively. Two-for-one and 50% off deals are





Feel the force; the high street bistro is back in fashion

uncommon because the core bistro products - quick-cooking cuts of beef, fish and cheese - are comparatively more costly than pizza and pasta.

"We try and stay clear of what has been termed 'dirty discounting'," says Robert Beacham, co-founder of Le Bistrot Pierre. "We don't do 40% and 50%, but we need a presence [in discounting]. We offer a free bottle of wine in January and February and prix fixe menus are our core business at lunch." All Le Bistrot Pierre sites offer two and three courses at lunch for £9.95 and £11.95 alongside early-bird offers in the evening.

Paramount - which has had great success with digital discounting through sites such as Toptable and Lastminute - takes a similar position, seeing a strong online presence for central-London focused Chez Gérard as particularly important. "These days a high proportion of potential customers check the net to find out where to eat out, even tourists. It's

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essential for us to be in the arena," explains Andrew James Steer, head of operations at both Brasserie Gérard and Chez Gérard.

But it is possible for bistro operators to market themselves effectively to bargain hunters with minimal sacrifice of margin. The French chains are well-suited to fixed-price menu deals as prix fixe is wholly in keeping with the overall proposition and authenticity of a French restaurant. Critically, a three-course prix fixe delivers a much higher average spend than in other sectors, where

restaurants often take a hit serving one heavily discounted course to savvy customers.

"Prix fixe is a great mechanism for us," says Brasserie Blanc's Lederer. "It's something that's been a solid pillar of the brand - we didn't introduce it in reaction to the recession like some operators have. It gets the blue-rinse brigade in who order a jug of tap water, but they fill the restaurant and we love them dearly. It also works as an opening gambit, a way of getting people into the restaurant for the first time."

Côte's approach to discounting has also been a notable success. Since its inception the group has only offered traditional discounts during soft opening periods, but a well-timed prix fixe menu is a cornerstone of its strategy. On weekdays only, two courses and three courses are available for £9.95 and £11.90 between 12noon and 7pm, although the deal is slightly different at the group's London sites.

This tends to fill the restaurant from lunchtime through to early evening, but crucially doesn't cannibalise revenue in the evening. "We don't have an artificial discount of any kind, we just offer a good value menu at certain times. We're in a good position: we're busy all day and we don't need to discount," says Bassadone.

THE BREAKFAST CLUB

The bistro chains are better placed than most to capitalise on the growth in all-day dining. Breakfast and brunch is a tough sell for ethnic and Italian restaurant groups. The latter in particular have struggled in their attempts to attract the morning pound; initiatives outside their comfort zones including breakfast pizza or Nuttella and doughballs have met with limited success.

Breakfast - or more aptly petit déjeuner - in a bistro feels natural, whether it's a quick café au lait and a croissant at 8am or a croque-madame with fresh jus d'orange for elevenses.

Café Rouge, Brasserie Gérard and Chez Gérard have long had a healthy presence on the breakfast scene and Côte has followed suit, opening early on weekdays with a brisk breakfast trade reported at most sites. "It's not a great profit centre, although we can be very busy for breakfast on the weekends, but it fills the restaurant early on and gets customers into the business," says Bassadone.

A CHANGING MARKETPLACE

The older chains, however, have had to make changes to cope with competition from other French concepts and the restaurant sector as a whole. Two months ago, Café Rouge shook up its menus, changing 50% of the dishes. It has introduced a petits plats section of small dishes including rilette, tapenade and cheeses served on a board, healthy choices (with all dishes under 600 calories) and plats rapides - low-cost dishes designed to be served quickly, including baguettes, croque monsieurs and tarts.

An emphasis on sharing dishes, healthy eating



Mussels: a popular menu item at Le Bistrot Pierre

and speed of service are all clear nods to the directions in which the casual-dining sector is currently moving. "Getting good food out quickly is central to our strategy at the moment," says Turner. "But we want to make people feel comfortable too. We're not offering special event meals anymore, these are places where people come regularly."

Similarly, Brasserie Gérard and Chez Gérard - two restaurant outfits previously guilty of 'over-enthusiastic' pricing - have lowered price points slightly. Both offer regular prix fixe menus alongside more conventional one-off deals including a plat du jour and a drink for £9.95.

So what's next for the sector? Brasserie Blanc's Lederer thinks regional French food will have an important role to play in the coming years. "The days of everyone being exactly the same are certainly over, but there is more scope for differentiation. A lot of French restaurants 'Disney-fy' French food and we've lost regional identity in most cases. France has got just as much variety and richness as Italy, for example, but it's underplayed. There are whole traditions of French food that people have never heard of," he says.

At the premium end of the dining industry, it's already happening. London outfits Club Gascon and Cigalon are already flying the flag for fiercely regional French food, specialising in Gascon and Provençale cuisine respectively.

Italian chain restaurants have capitalised on regional variations using themed menus to create a feeling of authenticity, and the French chains look set to do the same in the near future.

But Bassadone believes it is possible to over-think the bistro formula. "We're trying to

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Beginning to see the light, bistros are looking to other sectors for inspiration

create a classic, reliable and in many ways conservative French bistro. We're not trying to be something of the moment. If you get it right and are consistent - good food, good value and good service - you won't fall out of fashion."

As well as tweaking the formula at its existing branches, Tragus is also trialling a fast-casual version of Café Rouge outside Euston Station, with limited seating and an emphasis on takeaway items such as hot and cold sandwiches, soups and salads.

"It's been something we've been looking to do for a while," says Turner. "We've had great success at airports with our plats rapides and I think some elements of French food are well-suited to a quick bite to eat." If the trial is successful Tragus will look to acquire small units in high-footfall locations such as train stations and shopping centres.

Côte will continue to lead the sector's expansion with plans to open at least 10 restaurants a year. It is currently south-based but expansion further north is certainly on the cards with major cities such as Manchester, Leeds and Newcastle first on the hit list, as well as Glasgow and Edinburgh.

With the exception of the Paramount ventures, all the other mainstream bistro concepts are planning to expand significantly over the next few years. Hotel du Vin owner MWB Holdings will also become a major force if it achieves its goal of 12 central London sites by 2015.

Despite numerous challenges, some specific and some - including food cost inflation and greater competition across the board - faced by all restaurants, the bistro sector appears to be back in business. And that can only be une bonne chose.

RESTAURANT
R200

The Restaurant R200 club is made up of the UK's leading restaurant group operators. The 2011 list will be revealed next month

BRASSERIE BLANC

Number of sites: Nine

Owner: Private equity backer Core Capital and private stakeholders, including founder Raymond Blanc and managing director John Lederer
Founded: 1996 as Petit Blanc, became Brasserie Blanc in 2005

Originally Petit Blanc, Brasserie Blanc went through several changes of ownership (it's been operated by Loch Fyne and Orient-Express) during the mid-noughties. It is currently operated by Mark Derry and John Lederer, although Raymond Blanc is still a key-shareholder and remains involved in the business.

The menu revolves around simple, homely French food and, while there are some bistro classics such as steak frites, the offering is willfully different from its peers with the summer menu featuring Lamb Liver with Herb Butter and Duck Breast with Orange and Lime Sauce, Potato and Turnip Cake. Average spend is £15 at lunch and £29 at dinner, making it the most upmarket of the chains. Between three and four new sites are planned each year in affluent cities across England and satellite towns around London.



Brasserie Blanc: the most upmarket of the brasserie chains

Chez Gérard's Confit de Canard with woodland mushrooms and roasted shallots



BRASSERIE GÉRARD/ CHEZ GÉRARD

Number of sites: 19 and nine respectively

Owner: Paramount Restaurants, its two French brands make up the majority of its estate

Founded: 1986

It hasn't been plain sailing for Paramount Restaurants in recent years with a financial restructuring of the business in mid-2009 following the private equity owner's rather dramatic sale of its entire interest to lenders. Twenty-eight sites hit the market last year, but the good news for Brasserie Gérard and Chez Gérard is that they're considered Paramount's key brands - most of the jettisoned sites are Livebaits, Bertorellis and Caffè Unos.

The group is southern-focused, with a large presence in the capital. Brasserie Gérard is family orientated and more casual, geared towards London suburbs and home counties towns. Chez Gérard is located in central London only and necessarily pitched at a higher price point, with nine large sites (up to 300 covers) in high footfall locations including Covent Garden and the Southbank. Despite Paramount's issues, further expansion of the two brands has not been ruled out.

LE BISTROT PIERRE

Number of sites: Nine

Owner: Independent. Founders John Whitehead and Robert Beacham have an equal share and some equity has been given to key staff

Founded: 1994

Sticking to the north and upper Midlands has been a good tactic for John Whitehead and Robert Beacham, who see southern England as a "totally different market for restaurants". Le Bistrot Pierre emerged from the remnants of Pierre Levicky's 147-strong Pierre Victoire franchise, which collapsed in 1998. The duo were left with two high-performing units in Nottingham and Derby and have carefully expanded the estate organically with minimal bank debt.

Le Bistrot Pierre is pitched at a slightly lower price point than the rest of the bistro chains; spend per head is currently £23 in the evening and £13 or so at lunch. The menu revolves around classic French dishes with an emphasis on charcuterie and grilled meat and fish. Almost everything is made on site and each unit offers daily specials and a range of prix fixe menus that are the core business at weekday lunchtimes.

A flurry of new site launches this year - including a restaurant with rooms in Ilkley, West Yorkshire - mean that the pair will have to wait for the coffers to fill up before sourcing any more, but the long-term plan is to open around two new units a year. ■



Bistrot Pierre: where prix fixe menus are the core business at weekday lunchtimes

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