

The Menu Fetishist Returns

“Here’s our menu, let me know if you have any questions...” The phrase that launched a thousand meals. You read, you choose, you ask, they bring: no titillation here, nothing to see, please move along. You’re a menu fetishist? **You sick bastard...**

Words by Zeren Wilson

Illustration by Egle Zvirblyte

The first wine menu that gave me a genuine frisson of excitement, some twisted form of menu ‘horn’, happened while scrolling through the one at Noma at the beginning of 2010 (before it had been saddled with World’s Best Restaurant or any of that jazz). A thrilling Champagne list; knee juddering selection of Burgundy; love lavished on German Riesling and Austrian Grüner Veltliner; solid choices from Piemonte and Friuli; smattering of

excellent Northern Rhône producers; intriguing picks from the Loire, Savoie and Jura; a few choice options from Spain... and then the list stopped. Eh? Unbidden, this restaurant had ticked off most of my wine loves as if they had been waiting for me to call. No ‘dick swinging’ Bordeaux for the expense account crowd? No New World or iconic Californian magnum formats for millionaire Americans to show off? What nefarious, cocky and downright fascist

thought processes were going on here? A stubborn (and eminently laudable) decision had clearly been made that these wines, both in terms of varietal and style, suited the delicate nature of the menu, despite the fact they could easily have shifted plenty of ‘Big Dog’ wines for wedges of cash. It was the first time I had looked at a wine menu that instantly gave me a sense of the food, philosophy, and single-mindedness that was at work – the wine list was a window

into the soul of the restaurant.

A hefty wine tome placed on the table with an almighty 'thwack' in a Michelin starred restaurant is part of the joy of these establishments, but also can serve as an anti-social list, as a wine obsessive (me, others, maybe you) falls silent while flicking through the list, leaving dining companions bored, slightly irritated or mildly amused. In other instances, a snappy list, sleek, zero flab, can help make decisions for us. In restaurants, a short and limited food menu is, more often than not, lauded for parading a nous for seasonality and use of ingredients, or for focusing on excellence of execution rather than dazzling with choice. At the very extreme we have the ultimate: menu free bliss. Mr Peng has relieved Londoners of menu ennui for years at Hunan in Pimlico, delivering a succession of thrilling dishes until you tell him to stop. The Sportsman in Whitstable take great pleasure in offering the option to keep the tasting menu unread, allowing you to slump into their cosseting arms and just get on with the business of having a good meal. Besides, there are other pressing decisions to be made for the duration of a meal, such as 'what are we drinking?' and 'are we having another bottle?'

There are highfalutin psychological studies out there that talk about 'cognitive dissonance': the uncomfortable feeling created by having had to

make a choice between equally attractive alternatives. Essentially, choice creates potential anxiety (or so we're told). I dunno about that, but there's certainly a liberating feeling that follows having someone else doing the choosing. Perhaps some kind of menu nadir was achieved at Ray's & Stark Bar at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, where a 45-page water menu was thrown into the regular dining mix. If simple food and wine lists are creating some kind of buttock clenching dissonance amongst diners, this addition may send the more sensitive amongst us scuttling for the exit before self-combusting in a nervous twitch of indecision. Chilled tap water has never seemed such a welcome and sane option.

On UK menus, the days of florid and breathless dish descriptions in particular now seem mostly consigned to another era. Wine menus increasingly bristle with a quiet confidence, many given the added boost of increased

options at the higher end thanks to wine preservation units and the swanky Coravin wine dispensing system.

I can't seem to throw restaurant menus away. I find myself uttering 'do you mind if I keep this?' on most occasions, and while I may be convincing myself that it's for 'work' or 'research', the reality is that my cupboard is rammed to the gunnels with menus that refuse to be thrown away. 'Do you still need this?' somebody asks. 'Yes I bloody well do' I snap, snatching the precious document back, returning it to its place. There's a hefty pile from NYC, while London menus are peeking out from every crevice in every room. Maybe it's to bring back instant memories of a certain meal, to marvel at the wine descriptors, to coo over a certain font, to continue to rue the dishes I didn't order... or maybe it's for work. Yeah mate, it's research.

Okay, yes, damn it: I have a fetish for menus. Do you mind if I keep this one?

"Besides, there are other pressing decisions to be made for the duration of a meal, such as 'what are we drinking?' and 'are we having another bottle?'"

