



PAUL PAIRET

Je Ne Sais Quoi

Critically acclaimed avant-garde gastronome, Paul Pairet, has always caused a stir in the kitchen. He was first introduced to Shanghai's diners as the Chef de Cuisine of Jade on 36, but has now moved on to his highly acclaimed new project, Mr & Mrs Bund. Every month he treats readers to the good, the bad and the spectacular world of high-class cuisine.

Let's get wild Darling! Tonight, I'll take you out to a fancy restaurant. I've heard about this place – Je Ne Sais Quoi – I'll make the reservation.

Rrrring, rrrring ... "Allo?"

(I know that this ringing simulation isn't crucial to the overall understanding of the column, but I've always felt it's important to create an atmosphere, set the stage and immerse the reader in the action. Call it my Spielberg touch!)

"Welcome to Je Ne Sais Quoi, this is James speaking. Would you mind holding? I'll be right back to serve your call, Sir."

Woah! – James/welcome/Je Ne Sais Quoi/would/mind/serve/Sir. Is this for real? It's not a restaurant, it's wonderland.

Back again.

"Sir ... Yes Sir, certainly Sir ... Please do ... Rest assured ... It's my pleasure ... Delighted ... and have a wonderful afternoon."

Isn't that a touch too much? Sure, prolix politeness and superlative logorrhea is still better than the anticipated

antipathy. But too much often hides too little, and conversely, too little hardly ever hides much. The question is: can a phone reservation change the taste of the carpaccio?

You have assessed your needs and chosen a restaurant to match, not a random choice to fill a necessity, but a destination to fulfil expectations. In this case: Darling/wild/fancy.

The reputation of the place has influenced your choice and built up your hopes. A lot is already at stake. Your friend recommended the place by telling you it was superb and now you won't take less than superb.

But what if your friend went there out of the blue, by coincidence, and had no expectations, so the surprise of the place matching his definition of good meant it was upgraded to 'superb'?

And now your expectations are high, probably too high. How can you know whether his 'superb' matches your 'superb'? Is he a schmuck?

Finally Darling and you arrive at Je Ne Sais Quoi, ready to confront your expectations with reality.

"Too much often hides too little, and conversely, too little hardly ever hides much."



The restaurant is empty, the lights are dim, the music is elevator-style, and James, your dear James, the tuxedo-wearing-moustache-sporting-gentleman-butler you had envisioned is ultimately just a young waiter in a faded uniform. The carpaccio's taste has already dropped two notches. You dreamed of the Taj Mahal, and just landed in JOJO-land.

Darling's face freezes in a smile that says: "This is a mistake. It cannot be, not for our wedding anniversary."

Soldiering on, we look at the menu: "Rosace of twice poached wild South Australian lobster, trio of condiment and pan seared asparagus medley with parmigianno regianno ..."

Alas, James has undoubtedly been involved in the menu's taxonomy. This savant mixture of 17 century French haute cuisine combined with modern marketing flair generally hides a lack of ingenuity and honesty.

This doesn't necessarily mean that the cuisine is going to be in tune with the verbal diarrhoea. But generally, in the expert eyes of trade trendsetters, the phrasing on menus is quite revealing when it comes to the positioning of a restaurant. It reflects

the ambitions – and often the reality – of the cooking style.

In any case, the role of words on a menu is to create a vivid imagery. Images are the only Esperanto – the universal language. We all translate words into images, and then images in emotions.

And you thought that eating was just about chewing and swallowing! The psychological taste that you have in your mind prior to the actual physical tasting influences your perceptions in ways you can't even imagine.

That night, to our surprise, we experienced a straight-forward cooking style that swept out all the preconceived ideas that had taken shape in our psycho, pre-taste construction.

The endangered carpaccio ended up being fantastic – a slightly thick, hand cut fillet, not too cold, and lifted by a pungent and tasty arugula.

Bravo James! Je Ne Sais Quoi is indeed a well-named place. Enough to put a smile back on Darling's face.

Web: www.paulpairet.com