

The gastronomy festival

By Zafar Masud
Monday, 22 Jun, 2009

NECESSITY, they say, is the mother of invention. Though nobody so much as actually 'invented' the white caviar, its promotion at the second Gastronomy-by-Seine festival in Paris can certainly be linked with the astronomical prices (no play on words, honest!) of the real thing.

The Russian or Iranian varieties of this luxury, as we all know, are the product of five or six major species of the sturgeon that thrive in the dark depths of the Caspian Sea but, at the right moment, rise to shallow waters to lay their eggs.

Given the extremely narrow zone of the sturgeon's habitat, and certainly not forgetting the pollution, the global warming, the financial slump and all these wonderful things that we are in the process of elaborating as our legacy to future generations, caviar prices have shot up to dizzying heights; something like 3,000 to 4,000 euros per kilo!

No problem, assures a team of young people with imagination who work for the local gourmet food supplier De Viridi. The solution lies, they say, not in despairing but in cultivating snail eggs. No more complicated and costly expeditions to catch sturgeon in the far-out high seas; just look forward to raising the relaxed, easy-paced and friendly snail in your own back garden, is their word of advice to the gourmet crowd.

Meanwhile, those lacking back-garden facilities but very much present at the gastronomy festival were surprised to see vegetable, cream and truffle canapés served with what looked like a spread of shiny white pearls on the top. White caviar, they were informed as they bit into the goodies, discovering the exciting new taste of snail eggs.

Certainly not to be left behind as far as inventiveness is concerned, another promoter Apicius presented drinks, oils and tasty dishes created out of wild flowers, fruits, vegetables and roots. How can you make such perfectly delicious and digestible drinks and dishes with those flowers and vegetables still looking so fresh, someone asked. The secret is here, said the Apicius lady pointing towards a shiny stainless steel object that looked more like a spacecraft body part than a pressure cooker. The gastrovac, she said, creates the required pressure at the right temperature so quickly that the elements inside have no time to lose shape nor colouring and are perfectly cooked with their original aromas still intact.

Much like last year's festival, the 'substantial dish' aficionados were not disappointed in the quickly and expertly grilled salmon steaks. But this year it was not the Norwegian variety as an Alaskan group that had joined the festival in order to celebrate the 50th year of their territory's becoming part of the United States was performing the task with as much expertise as the Norwegians, or nearly so.

History nuts, even if they do not care about being fine gourmets, will be delighted to recall that Alaska was purchased from the Russian empire by the Americans in 1867 at a throwaway price of two cents an acre. Since the territory was lots of acres, it cost \$7.2m just the same to the buyer, to finally become the 49th state of the US on Jan 3, 1959. But that's another story.

The salmon steak promoters nevertheless had a tough competitor this year in Bord Bia, the official Irish food promotion agency. Steaming dishes of roasted beef and grilled lamb chops swam alluringly on platters amid a bewildered crowd that looked undecided whether to stay with the bitter-sweet taste of the Nordic salmon or to move on to the powerful sensation of meat. You could bet there were not many who resisted the temptation.

To food critic Naomi Barry the discovery of the year was Léa Linster who runs a country-house type restaurant of the same name close to Luxembourg City. "Demonstrating her skill at making a salmon confit with watercress and virgin olive oil, she looked as if the mission of her entire life was to make people happy tasting her delicious dishes," Naomi says.

A tastefully decorated, and very fragrant, long table assembled an unbelievably vast collection of teas. There were colourful containers and packets on display and a seemingly endless trail of loose tea-leaves samples was also exposed in a row of open chinaware, glittering flames of tea-flavoured candles dancing between them. Do you know, asked a propped-up cardboard sign, that the drink most consumed in the world, next to water, is tea and that 15,000 cups are drunk across the globe every second?

Like the last time, this year's event took place aboard a luxury yacht in full view of the Eiffel Tower. The moving spirit behind the Gastronomy-by-Seine festival is former Belgian lawyer Michel Cloes who has now decided to devote the rest of his life to the service of gourmet food as the head of Chef Culinary Network that he has helped found. In his hurry, Michel apparently forgot to order last year's sunny and warm weather, though that omission failed to drown either the dedication of the chefs, a youthful Guillaume Gomez, the head of the Elysée Palace kitchen among them, or the enthusiasm of a very eager pack of invitees.

Altogether some 400 members of the international culinary community, from health-diet experts to famous restaurant chefs to fine chocolate-makers, shared their techniques during discussions and gave demonstrations of their art. Michel Cloes was justly proud of his achievement, constant downpour notwithstanding.

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