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TASTE AND TRANSCENDENCE

TUESDAY, MARCH 12, 2013

Not many outside the food world know the culinary power of Paul Pairet, but that's about to change, writes ELLE KWAN

BY THE TIME Paul Pairet arrived in Shanghai in 2005, his culinary journey had taken him across the globe. Once in China, first with the avant-garde Jade on 36 at Pudong Shangri-La, and then with Mr & Mrs Bund, he opened restaurants showcasing French techniques fused with the ingredients and influences he'd picked up overseas. His food was world class, his restaurants convivial. Pomp and stuffiness were nowhere to be seen. "Mr & Mrs Bund is, at its heart, French. Occasionally, the rest of

the world also joins in," reads the menu at Pairet's modern establishment. "We riff on classics, we dish up comfort cuisine, and we serve it just like you would Sunday night dinner – sharing-style, and with plenty for seconds."

Dishes such as Cod In The Bag served with a "Cantonese sauce" or teriyaki ribs appear on a menu along with four types of potatoes: mashed, hand-cut thin fries, Pairet's own extra-thick fries and a dauphinois of truffle and brie cheese, merging high- and lowbrow food traditions and drawing loyal fans. And after the opening of Mr & Mrs Bund, Pairet was almost content.

When he announced the opening of Ultraviolet, members of the foodie community gasped. Whispers of a gimmicky venture played upon people's lips. Once doors opened at the restaurant, more gossip leaked. A secret location! One table shared by 10 – 10 people you don't even know! While "No shark's fin" or dishes such as cucumber lollipops may have had a familiar witty ring for Pairet's fans, this new project was still viewed as a radical departure.

Pairet wanted to present far more than new recipes. Ultraviolet was to offer a vivid dining experience where all of the senses, stimulated through music, smell and setting, would be aroused on a grand scale through each of the courses – and there are 22. There was doubt that even a chef with Pairet's pedigree might not be able to pull off such a massive endeavour. Could ego have superseded good sense?

Perhaps everyone should have known better. The Frenchman has long shied away from the limelight, preferring to keep his food in the spotlight. He favours humbling quotes such as "Humour is the antidote to pretension." His style has never been described as serious; words more frequently chosen are whimsical and light-hearted.

Today, roughly a year since Ultraviolet's opening, critics happily divulge that there is magic, not madness, at play. "He's pushed the boundaries of how people experience food. That experience is unimaginable in the extreme," says William Drew, editor of *Restaurant* magazine, which is famed for having launched The World's 50 Best Restaurants list. "But most memorable to me was that the evening is great fun. You laugh and smile your way through four hours of food and experience, and it's just great, great fun."

In fact, the time might be right for the chef to come out from hiding in the kitchen. In February, Asia's 50 Best Restaurants awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award to Pairet. He was chosen, says Drew, for his "innovation and vision". Pairet plays down the praise with a gentle dollop of humour. "I feel good – James Brown good. Honoured and humbled of course, but proud as well."

The Asia list is a spin off from The World's 50 Best Restaurants, an industryvoted catalogue that has become one of the cooking world's most anticipated references. Unprepared to bask, Pairet is looking beyond his win to what the Asian-centric list could help achieve in the region. Lists such as the 50 Best have opened the food and beverage market internationally, and give chefs a valuable opportunity for recognition.

Food in Asia remains steeped in cultural tradition that struggles to transcend into modern-day interpretations. "It is still seeking a "contemporary translation," says Pairet. But he sees increasing breakouts. Richard Ekkebus at Amber in Hong Kong, Ryan Clift at Tippling Club in Singapore, David Thompson at Nahm in Bangkok and China's Dong Zhenxiang, who is known for his elevated Peking-duck dishes at Dadong Roast Duck, are already turning out winning, innovative, original cuisine. He expects more to follow. "There's a kind of energy in Asia right now," he says.

Some of that energy has to do with Asia's buoyant market. Pairet received unwavering support from his backers – VOL Group in China – which, he says, gave him freedom to flourish. Too often corporations or teams surrounding chefs can be detrimental, quashing creativity and hampering vision, he believes. A downside to awards or recognition is that they ignite market trends that are thrust on chefs to replicate, and can be damaging. "You do have to try and be yourself. Trying to push your dream has a lot of ups and downs. I see so many talented young chefs giving up," he adds.

Pairet began his cooking career almost by accident. Despite an early foray into food via a Disney book of recipes – "It was fun, whimsical and spirited, so still my bible today," he jokes – he went on to study sciences, migrating to hospitality later, where cooking was the only subject that interested him. He entered kitchens to train at age 20, later than his peers, taking his scientific approach with him, studying the works of his food heroes and learning their techniques by heart. Paul Bocuse, Michel Trama, Joël Robuchon and, later, Alain Ducasse and Ferran Adrià became inspirations. Ducasse, recognising Pairet's talent, hired him to transform Cam at The Ritz-Carlton, Istanbul into the city's first cutting-edge restaurant.

Pairet mined each destination, which came to include Hong Kong, Jakarta and Sydney, for the ingredients, techniques and inspiration that came to define him. "The strongest impact travelling had was certainly to open my mind to other cultures, other tastes and, subsequently, to enrich my chef's vocabulary without diluting it," he says.

The seeds for Ultraviolet sprouted in 1996, when Pairet was in Australia. He began experimenting with plating. He made alterations to his dining rooms, in their decoration, the music choice and table

settings, seeking to elevate mealtimes with multiple layers. He wanted change. "It was the intangible things. I wanted to push the environment. I wanted to set the plate in its own environment," he says. "In any kind of à la carte restaurant there is a formula. You sit. You choose from the menu. In 10 minutes your appetiser arrives. For me, I wanted to avoid that constraint."

He admits to being nervous when Ultraviolet finally happened. "I was not so sure that people would come right away." What has happened is that the restaurant's own brand of relaxed adventure has attracted more than dedicated foodies. Pairet is most pleased about that.

What began as a job has become a passion. He lists more than 2,000 food books in his collection. He chooses travel destinations around food he wants to sample, though he rarely leaves the kitchen. "I don't sing, I don't dance, I don't surf...nothing else," he says, with a trickle of laughter.

Ultraviolet looked like an experiment, but really it was the culmination of a 15-year journey to evoke in others what food evokes in the chef. Rather than a gimmick, it's all Pairet ever wanted.

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