

Up in Smoke

This is a subject not often broached by food writers, but it's very much on my mind. Having recently returned from a few days in New York, Mary and I are still in a state of bliss over the total absence of smoke in New York restaurants (aside from the occasional over-barbecued steak). For me it's merely a matter of pleasure – I'm an ex chain pipe smoker who used to get through an ounce of tobacco a day. When I gave it up I was amazed to discover that I still had the ravaged remnants of a palate. Now when someone lights up in a restaurant it annoys me and to some extent spoils the pleasure of my meal, but it's not a crisis.

Mary, on the other hand, is really damaged by cigarette smoke in a closed area – it does terrible things to her throat. And so I'm looking forward with mixed emotions to a week in Paris, much of which will be spent in a series of hand-picked bistros. There are now, by law, no-smoking areas in French restaurants, but they're merely a scattering of arbitrarily selected tables, usually somewhere at the back furthest from any outside ventilation. So far as actual protection from smoke is concerned, it's about as effective as the imaginary shield surrounding certain local councils who used to declare themselves “nuclear-free zones”. It's a calculated risk. In July the chance of a table near an open window is pretty good, and if Mary does a Mimi act they may allow us to occupy it.

A week later I'll be back in Paris again, this time with my old friend Frank (immortalized in *Through Darkest Gaul*). Frank has an even more serious problem than Mary – it doesn't take much smoke to give him a splitting headache which can go on for a day or more. The same with strong perfumes, which these days resemble the odors which perfumes were once designed to hide. In other words, once out of America, Frank must take a real gamble to enjoy a meal that isn't prepared at home.

It only takes a moment's reflection to realize that smokers have really put one over on us (easy since they were once a majority of the adult population). Suppose you walked into a restaurant, set a brazier on your table and lit a cone of strong incense? Or broke open a head of fresh garlic and proceeded to chew your way through it, breathing heavily at adjoining tables? Or brought your pet skunk? There would be an immediate and justifiable outcry. But those little paper tubes of dried leaves are sacred. Go on, light up – destroy your own apprehension of a fine meal and everyone else's. Smoke your way through a fine claret; but don't bring out your fags at a serious wine tasting or the pros, who know how it will affect their judgement, will have your guts for garters.

In the overcrowded area of Paris restaurant guides, there's room for one more – a listing of restaurants which during the summer feature pleasant al fresco dining. Time Out's guide to restaurants in New York, where such information is not crucial, nevertheless devotes two pages to “outdoor eating”. But their guide to Paris, where it can make the difference between agony and ecstasy, doesn't even give it a mention. Come on – who'll be the first to admit the obvious and fill the gap? The emperor may not be naked, but he certainly has BO.