

THE ART OF FINE DINING

Over the last decade our dining landscape has changed beyond all recognition, with the emergence of 'super chains' & Branded restaurants being rolled out almost as quickly as they are closed down. No longer is dining out an elitist pastime or a special occasion treat, but an everyday occurrence. With the casual dining market experiencing its biggest boom ever & the likes of MacDonald's & JD Weatherspoon's sitting at the top of the league table, what is it that draws us back to *Fine Dining*?

Firstly, we need to understand what we mean when we say fine dining. Like the word *Gastropub* it is a term which has been banded around and misused for far too long!

Historically Fine Dining was aspirational and in some senses elitist. Following the French revolution in the late 1700's households who would previously have employed a brigade of cooks to run their kitchens found themselves unable to do so, and at the same time there was a glut of kitchen workers seeking employment, and so it happened that 'restoratives' or restaurants naturally started to emerge enabling the upwardly mobile middle classes to experience a 'royal dining experience' beyond their financial means. In 1814 Brillat-Savarin, a famous gastronomic chronicler, credited Antoine Beauvilliers with being 'the first to combine the 4 essentials of dining - an elegant room - smart waiters - a choice cellar - and superior cooking', thus making him the world's first 'celebrity Chef' and the founder of *Fine Dining*.

But now with all facets of hospitality welcoming such a diverse range of diners we must revise exactly what it means to us in the context of global cuisine and today's world.

For me Fine dining is about passion, about a devotion to delivering the best possible overall experience, in fact *fine dining* has little to do with actually dining! It is a given that the food offering, like every other detail, must be the best. Indeed, I know many a chef who rarely sees the light of day due to their un-erring devotion to sourcing the finest produce, mastering the latest culinary techniques & experimenting with flavour combinations. Without these almost spectral (in every sense) beings there would be no dining. However, if we accept that our kitchens are delivering the finest dishes what is it that sets one experience apart from another?

When we look to the emerging power houses of fine dining, the likes of Rene Redzepi, Ferran Adria, Francis Mallmann, Björn Frantzén, we see the very same attributes which originally defined fine dining but applied in a very unique and personal way. No longer are we constrained by outdated formalities and constraints but driven by the desire to perfect every minute detail of our offering. In order to deliver this level of dedication and attention to detail it has to be a culture, a way of life. For every individual involved in the process it must be an obsession, a true team effort. Whether it is sourcing the rarest wines in the world or ensuring that there are no fingerprints on the tableware, that the music lighting and heating are set to exactly the right level to create the perfect ambiance or seasoning a plate of freshly cut asparagus, every individual is a cog in a far bigger machine. A machine which will not work if just one of the cogs is misaligned!

One of the largest variables, and one of the biggest challenges in professional hospitality is personnel. From the moment that you walk through the door you want to feel that you are embarking upon a journey to remember. You want to be put at ease but at the same time made to feel that you and you alone are the very reason for the restaurant existing. You want to be advised and enlightened without feeling patronised and belittled, but above all you want to feel important. There are very few individuals who have the natural ability to deliver such a level of engagement without it feeling strained or forced. This coupled with an inherent wealth & depth of knowledge is an extremely rare commodity but one which we must cultivate to truly deliver.

'Rules are made to be broken'... well actually they are not! Whether you go back to the very origins of *fine dining* or look to the cutting-edge operators of today, the same measures are used to judge what is fine dining

'To receive guests is to take charge of their happiness during the entire time they are under your roof'

– Brillat-Savarin