

'Mad genius' tones down to hone kitchen arts



Aubrey Buckingham

It is sometimes hard to take Paul Pairet seriously. Seldom has the label "mad genius" been more apt, more essential in describing the mercurial Frenchman.

Love it or hate it, Jade on 36 put the city on Asia's culinary map and had critics raving about the intelligent design of Pairet's menus through the years. Here was a chef, at the height of his career, and what does he do? He opens a brasserie on the Bund.

suddenly announced his departure from the Pudong Shangri-La. Over the months prior to the opening of Mr and Mrs Bund, his modern eatery at Bund 18 (taking over from the Pourcelet brothers' monumental failure Sens and Bund), speculation was rife as to what he would do

with the 150-seater prime venue at one of the Bund's hottest locations.

It was obvious he was not going to replicate the avant-garde culinary classroom he was known for at Jade, but what exactly was he bringing to the table except a rather silly name? How was he to connect with his diners in the same playful manner for which he was lauded?

I was soon to find out. After the customary handshakes were dispensed with, the cavalier 44-year-old whisked me into the kitchen on my omelet.

"Making an omelet takes a special skill, a special movement," he says. "A hotel chef who does 300 for breakfast every morning is good at it, but normally it's hard to do."

Here, everything is weighed precisely — 125 grams of egg mix, 40 grams of ham and 40 grams of mozzarella. To cut a

long story short ("Too late!" you cry), I was no Robuchon and my 12-second pressure-steamed omelet was far from perfect.

What it did reveal, however, was that Pairet was taking the culinary arts very seriously indeed. He is not there to reinvent the wheel but rather to perfect modern, trendy French fare.

"Sharing is the core part (of the menu). All this taken from the Chinese tradition. In my mind being popular means to offer a maximum number of options. This is far (being played out).

A quick perusal of the extensive, 200-item menu (besides taking much time and effort to bear) reveals his true intentions — to make food you can eat a few times a week at a price that, while still dear, will not cost an arm and a leg to enjoy.

True, there were some recognizable items from Jade, but these (such as his shrimp in a jar) are dishes that have followed in since his days in Hong Kong (Pairet describes them as a link between his projects).

Instead of doing a lunch service, Mr and Mrs Bund will open from 6pm till 4am from May 15. Much like a Cantonese *cha chan teng* open to cater to the late-night set, Pairet and his team see potential not only to lure the clubbers from the uber-popular Bar Rouge and the chic Lounge 18 but also to get people to head back to the Bund again.

The wine geek crowd is already buzzing at the wine by the glass selection, powered by the ever-reliable Enomatic machines sponsored by ASC Fine Wines. Here, wine lovers can select their own wines to taste from the nitrogen cabinet, including a 1994 Petrus, at 1,618 yuan (US\$238) for a small tasting portion.

The omelet exercise revealed many things. It gave me a tour of the much-talked-about kitchen, which Pairet strengthened with considerable budget from the

VOL Group. More crucially, it reminded me that the Catalan takes his cooking very seriously indeed, like an Old Master painting an egg.

Pairet talks of mastering time, of serving food at the right moment to deliver maximum impact on the senses, all with one eye on the future.

While he parted amiably with the Shangri-La group, he remains disappointed he was unable to expand. Already quietly confident M&M will

be a success (though he is still aware of the financial implications such an outlay brings), Pairet hopes to announce his new restaurant soon.

The new project will take him back to his creative roots. He talked about the hope to incorporate audio-visual elements into his dining experience — perhaps this can be done sooner than we think.

A conversation with Paul Pairet often delivers more material that can fit in a typical article, but I think

his message is clear. M&M is doing something that fills a niche in the market, while Pairet gets to hone his skill at being a "normal" chef before working on his empire.

As for the name I have derided so often, upsetting people in the process, the Frenchman merely laughs. "Yes, it is ridiculous. But we are proud of it."

Address: 6/F, 18 Zhongshan Rd E1
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Paul Pairet demonstrates the art of making an omelet at his new Mr and Mrs Bund, where wine lovers can select their own wines to taste (top).

— Dong Jun

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This week was the first time I saw Pairet since he suddenly announced his departure from the Pudong Shangri-La. Over the months prior to the opening of Mr and Mrs Bund, his modern eatery at Bund 18 (taking over from the Pourcel brothers' monumental failure Sens and Bund), speculation was rife as to what he would do with the 150-seater prime venue at one of the Bund's hottest locations.

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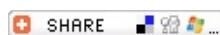
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(*Shanghai Daily* May 7, 2009)

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