

# Eating out

## Giles Coren



TOM JACKSON

‘In the company of le French Jamie, the afternoon passed, in chatter and chuckles, in the fluentest French, just like what I’m parlaying ici’

### Bar des Prés

**W**hat do you suppose the French is for “lovely jubbly”? “Jolie joblie”? “Belle jebelle”? “Agréable jabléable”? “Ravissant jublavissant”?

C’est une question tricky, dont je ne sais pas du tout l’answer. Et c’est une question importante, en plus, parce que le chef/prop du restaurant dans this week’s column est une certain jeune grenouille charmante, très connu et super-casual sur la télé, que les tabloids français appellent “Le French Jamie Oliver”, à cause de son spiky cheveux et “cheeky chappy” demeanor.

Je ne te shit pas, mon vieux china. C’est la pukka vérité. Le geezer’s vrai nom est Cyril Lignac et après avoir being trained by top boss chefs Alain Passard et Pierre Hermé (moi non plus), Cyril a trouvé nationwide fame dans le hit TV cooking show *Oui Chef!*, avec le result qu’il a quickly opened beaucoup de restaurants chez lui, en France. Il a un gaff à Paris avec le nom Bar des Prés, qui serve le raw food only (je ne sais pas pourquoi, mais je vais demander) et les top-flight cocktails. Et maintenant c’est un case of “Nice one, Cyril!”, avec le launch de son premier restaurant à Londres.

Je l’ai visité la semaine dernière avec mon pukka vieux mate Jim, qui funnily enough has recently become Français himself. Parce que le Brexit. Sa femme est un poulet français, tu vois, alors Jim’s only gone and taken her nationalité pour get through passport control quicker et stuff comme ça. And it totally makes me rire, parce que Jim ne parle pas un seul flipping mot de French. Which means I parler le français meilleur que at least one genuine kosher Frenchy. You know what I mean?

The British Bar des Prés is a great-looking little joint on Albemarle Street in Mayfair, which was Manish Mehrotra’s wonderful Indian Accent until he closed last summer after barely two years, citing an inability to operate under social distancing (you and me both, Manish). There is a marble-topped eating counter at the bar (with places reserved for “Gilles et Jim”, you see what I did there?) and lots of cosy blue booths along the walls, rammed to the gills with men in their late thirties dressed as hedge fund managers and serial killers presumably because, this being Mayfair, they really were all hedge fund managers and... Well, hedge fund managers.

In case you haven’t been out for a while (and who has?), when I say that they were “dressed like hedge fund managers”, I mean that they were wearing £1,000 Italian loafers, indigo jeans, open-necked shirts of the palest blue, dark blue suit jacket, white gold cufflinks engraved with the names of their two favourite prostitutes,



**Bar des Prés**  
 16 Albemarle Street,  
 London W1 (020 3908  
 2000; bardespres.com)  
**Cooking 8**  
**Service 8**  
**Cyril 9**  
**Score 8.33**  
**Price** Je ne vais pas  
 tell a lie: c'est un bras  
 et une jambe. Les prix  
 exactes son dans les  
 brackets below, bruv.

signet ring on the pinkie and hair blow-dried three minutes ago, round the corner in John Frieda. Except with one or two of them wearing all that but with a cream cashmere polo neck instead of a shirt. Those are the serial killers.

The great thing about hedgies (and serial killers) is that they know their restaurants. These guys have all eaten in the Paris Bar des Prés (or want the others to think they have) and have picked this place because they know it will be great. And it is. Expensive but great. Or, as the hedgies say, expensive AND great.

Jim and I ordered a couple of Freedom lagers (£6 a bottle) to wash the morning away, which we drank while Jim grilled the big guy in front of us, behind the bar, about which was their best cocktail. Jim accepted no, "Some people like..." or, "This is very popular," but insisted on the guy's actual personal favourite (Jim's so French) and we were rewarded with two excellent mezcal margaritas (£17 each), exotically half-rimmed with black salt. The guy himself could have loosened up a bit, though. Big fellers in dark suits with masks can look quite menacing – halfway between Asprey's security beef and Mossad agent – and while he *might* have been smiling under there, I don't think he was. And he looked at his phone too much. What was he doing? Greenlighting the drone assassination of an Iranian scientist in Yemen? If I'm paying £34 for two drinks, isn't that enough to have his full attention?

The table staff were much friendlier though, and our waiter explained that while there was a lot of raw food, there was also a lot of hot, crispy food. Which was music to my ears. If there is raw and there is hot and crispy I am happy and need nothing in between. (It turns out the reason they offer only raw food in Paris is because the property is so expensive there's no room for a kitchen – while here in bargain-basement Mayfair it's burners à go-go.)

I ordered blind with a swirling pin over the various needy headings ("Land & sea", "Raw & marinated") and was rewarded with a procession of brightly coloured, sharply accented, beautifully fresh and precisely plated European variations on Japanese themes, and vice versa.

First up was seared chutoro (five pieces for £21): "Voilà, bish, bosh," said my guy. "Pukka tuna, lovely jubbly, avec les wicked tiny potato crusty bits like me nan makes and just a slug of le chilli vinaigrette – that'll put some cheveux on yer chest, bruv."

Actually, he didn't. He was a very elegant and lovely Frenchman and the dish was fantastic. Yellowtail maki rolls (£9 for six) were followed by a wondrous riff on nigiri sushi, with gorgeous salmon draped over rice that had been fried into crispy, sticky little fingers (five for £16) and then fresh little spring rolls of king crab with cubes of mango and flecks of mint rolled in lettuce (seven slices for £20).

Et après ça, o, là, là, là, là, a wicked pukka galette (£19), crispy as you like, mon frère, wiv,

like, the sweetest crab au curry Madras for un peu de spice, vous savez what I mean? And then, oh my days, the ripest, sweetest flipping avocado, sliced well fine and laid sur le top, for the most... Oh, je ne sais pas expliquer, like a sort of cold-hot, crabocado pie? Wicked.

There was an escalope of breaded volailles des Landes (£26) – a St Germain riff on katsu with a sriracha mayonnaise (I actually do this at home wiv me wife's fried chicken for the kids, bro: just squish out a load of Hellmann's, bosh a big squirt of sriracha on top and Bob's your uncle) – and a somewhat underpowered and dainty take on Nobu's famous old black cod in miso (£39). But I've not eaten cod in miso in two years, thanks to lockdown, and, like Woody Allen films, Asterix books and bullfights, even a slightly disappointing cod in miso is better than no cod in miso at all.

Look, you might say these all sound like rather frantic, attention-seeking microdishes for easily bored oligarchs and their squeaky-faced wives, and I wouldn't necessarily argue. But they are the best of their kind that I've come across in a long time and, come on, this guy's not going to come over here and do a load of 15-minute, one-pot meals for busy mums, easy as you like, bosh bish, slam it in and open the chardonnay, wahay, now is he? Although I'm sure that will come.

I loved every mouthful and best of all, when Cyril came bouncing out from the kitchen to do his tiggerish rounds, I liked him, personally, a lot. He's funny and smart and modest and cute, with lovely skin and expressive hands, and will go a long way on British television too.

Trained as a pastry chef, he was desperate for us to try his famous mille-feuille and, merry on mezcal and ice-cold lager and only partially sated by the procession of alpha party nibbles, I wasn't going to fight him. And, yes, the thousand-layered pastry with its sweet, vanilla-scented cream and pecan praline was a lovely thing to gobble with coffee, as, for a certain generation of nostalgic Englishman, was the tapioca (tapioca!) under armfuls of wild strawberries.

And thus, with a couple of armagnacs and the more or less undivided attention of le French Jamie, the afternoon passed, in chatter and chuckles, in the fluentest French, très cosmopolitan, just like what I've been parlaying ici, parce que, Brexit or no Brexit, nous sommes tous Français maintenant, n'est-ce pas, me old mate?

Lovely jubbly. ■