
If you don’t know who Shannon Bennett is, this is so not the guide book for you. If you do know who Shannon Bennett is but wouldn’t dream of paying $500 a head for dinner and $1300 for a hotel room, this may be the most entertaining guide book you’ve read for onks. It cheered me up enormously to learn that even 3-star chefs who make their reservations months in advance and reconfirm that reservation on arrival in Paris can still be seated in a tiny claustrophobic cellar and served a boring plate of vegetables costing 40€. (L’Arpège, Michelin 3*). It amused me no end to learn that in the 1100€ a night hotel room the slate floors were chilly, the Bang & Olufsen TV didn’t rotate enough to be watched from the bed, the poor acoustics ensured guests were kept awake by all-night parties in the courtyard, and when Mrs Bennett rang the 24-hour room service for a 7am espresso she was told ‘Non, we no do coffee yet’ (Murano Urbano Resort, 5*).

Shannon Bennett, at 34, is widely regarded as one of Australia’s best chefs and his Melbourne restaurant Vue de Monde (note the shonky French) has been showered with countless awards. It has either just moved, or is about to move, from its original Little Collins Street location to the 55th floor of the Rialto building, which will do nothing to lower the prices. But Shannon is not one to dwell on prices. Plan your budget before you go to a fine-dining restaurant, he advises in the introduction to his book: ‘You don’t want to sit there wondering, “What is this going to cost me?”’ Quite. Nothing spoils a restaurant meal more than discovering you can barely afford a plate of vegetables.

Bennett first went to Paris at age 16 and fell in love at a farmers’ market: a punnet of fraises des bois gave him butterflies in his stomach. He’s been going back every chance he gets and the butterflies are still there. One of the charms of this book is Bennett’s continuing enthusiasm for the foodie delights of the French capital, despite the odd surly waiter and the hauteur of some three-star maitre d’s. He wrote his guide to Paris (and some sixty pages on ‘the finest culinary journeys’ outside the capital) in response to his restaurant customers seeking his advice on where to stay and where to eat. Note that please: this is a guide book for people rich enough to eat regularly at the most expensive restaurant in Australia. Friends have also contributed: one of the most experienced travellers, and one of the best at translating his dining experiences to words on the page, is Scott Murray, who seems able to remember every detail of every meal ever eaten, even ones dating back thirty years. Stephanie Alexander is also a contributor, and I was, of course, delighted to learn that her booking at the 3-star Lucas Carton, made by the Australian Embassy in Paris, was completely stuffed up and the waiters were incredibly rude. She also provides my favourite accommodation recommendation (for guestapartment.com): ‘They have very helpful young men’.

This is a beautifully produced, lavishly illustrated little hardback which, besides listing the best food shops, restaurants and hotels in every arrondissement, also contains recipes for Bennett’s favourite French dishes. (You might be staying in an apartment and have a sudden urge to throw together a classic Bouillabaisse with Rouille and Garlic Croutons. If so, good luck: there are 30 listed ingredients.) There

are some editing lapses: the same information about the Murano Urban’s location and its tiny gym is repeated over two pages; the glamorous and expensive Café de la Paix, opened in 1862, ‘has been attracting the Parisian hoi polloi’ ever since (with a la carte prices ranging from 45-130€, that’s an extremely well-heeled hoi polloi), and I could have done with less reliance on the adjective ‘amazing’. At Le Meurice, for example, the people-watching was ‘just amazing’, the chef did an ‘amazing job’, and the balance of the meal was ‘amazing’.

I read this guide book shortly before I went to Paris. Did I take it with me? I did not – it weighs well over half a kilo, for a start. I ate at only one listed restaurant, the Brasserie Balzar (Michelin: no stars) because it was near my 2-star hotel in the Latin Quarter, and it was okay. But I delighted in many of the same street markets, bought baguettes at Kayser, cheese at Androut and window-shopped the great gourmet food stores in the Place de la Madeleine. I am not, however, a foodie: noting the long queues outside the famous Ladurée, I decided no macaron was worth the wait when the whole of Paris was begging to be explored. For Bennett and his friends, the whole of Paris would have been right there in the first blissful mouthful.

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