

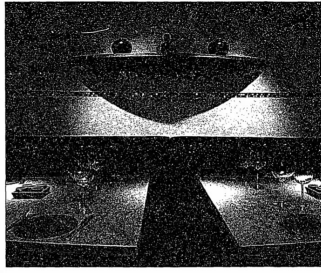
In the future, they say, all restaurants will be like Vong. **Matthew Fort** finds out what lies behind the hype

Chic, too chic

Vong simply reeks, my dears, of design and chic. The waiters have uniforms that glimmer. The maître d'hôtel has a jacket with four buttons in the front, and he does them up — every one of them. There is the up-to-the-nanosecond restaurant prop, the wiggly twig. You can see the passion play in the kitchen through a window. You don't get bread, you get rice things

that splinter all down your front, with a pepped-up peanut-butter dip to dip the sharks in, and you get Jean-Georges Vongerichten's Thai-lam-mets-western-cuisine-minceur cooking, sort of.

Vong has even been hailed as a vision of the food that is to come, but... well, really, I mean, really... All this may make Vong sound like a compendium of all that is most odious about eating out today. If so, I apologise. It's



Vong at lunch: jet-setters claim Vong's London branch (above) is not a patch on Vong in New York. But it's still surprisingly cheap and achingly glossy

really rather nice, the service is quite charming, and the food isn't all that bad. Those who collect Air Miles

in the same way I collect the tokens off cereal packets will tell you that the food at *the Vong* isn't as simply fabulous, you know, really, really great as *the Vong*. They will tell you that you know what great food is when you eat Jean-Georges's food in Vong, New York. But it still makes a refreshing change from, and a cheerful addition to, metropolitan getting out and about.

And when Vong's pushing out lunch at £20 for three courses, that's good going for senior service and some pretty soul-soothing tucker.

That is not, however, what I thought the first time I went there. Over-scented and, whether spiced or not, is mush. A bowl of rice spended on your plate by way of a vegetable is a mess. And if only you could have heard Pimlott's observations about portion control when eyeing the grilled beef and noodles in ginger broth, you might well have concluded that an eternity between meals at Vong would not be long enough. Pimlott rang me up afterwards and said that he had had to construct a bowl of porridge when he got home in order to fill the gap.

So why we ever went back, I'll never know. But I am glad we did, because things were altogether different, and Pimlott went some way towards eating the words he uttered after our previous outing.

Among the first and second courses, the Thai inspirations win hands-down over the western influences, and I am not going to complain about that. What it all boils down to, if you'll pardon the expression, is a clever variation on that most American of gastronomic inventions, the dip.

Have you ever noticed when eating in America that everything comes with a pungent dipping sauce of

some kind? So often the basic ingredients are inherently tasteless, but bung a sappy concoction of chili, tomatoes, lime juice, coriander and what-have-you on the plate, and away you go, with something to set lip, tongue and tooth all a-quiver.

J-G V's set pieces have very much the same éclat. Take my first course. It was billed as raw tuna and vegetables wrapped in rice paper. So there came several short, fat sausage rolls looking ever so pretty — the oxblood of the tuna, the brilliant orange of the carrot, the pale jade of the cucumber all crinkled tightly together inside the rice paper.

There was the crunch of vegetables, and the spiggle of tuna, but not the hum of flavour. That was hardly surprising, because — to this decadent western palate, anyway — the taste of these ingredients is, shall we say, delicate? Fugitive? Non-existent? Then I dipped a roll in the clean, clear-tasting, chilli-redolent sauce that accompanied them, and, hey presto, I had flavour.

And so it went with Pimlott's grilled prawns on a stick with deep-fried turo sticks, which he described as "rather hard work", my tamarind-glazed duck breast with spicy sesame sauce. Pimlott's grilled swordfish, and my fruit salad with white-pepper ice cream.

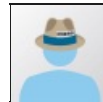
Actually, with the puddings, western tastes began to make a bit of a comeback, and the white-pepper ice cream was a conspicuously good idea. The spicy heat of the pepper provided an almost surreal contrast to the smooth, cool luxury of the ice cream.

What with two glasses of some fruity house white, and a bottle of shiraz from Oz and other matters, the food part of the \$69.65 bill amounted to £41.25 — astonishingly reasonable when you consider the amount you think you're going to have to pay to get in somewhere so achingly glossy.

As we collected our lathered winter wear from the smiling girl at reception, Pimlott and I had a bit of an epiphany, a bit of a meeting of minds. J-G V's food is, we concluded, the product of a rare passion rather than of a culture or a personality. Do you see what we mean? It scores well up the scale for intelligence, interest and even pleasure, but it did not lift us above and beyond. ■

Vong, Wilton Place, London SW1. Tel: 0171-235 1010. Open: Monday-Saturday, 12am-2.30pm, 6pm-11.30pm. Menu: lunch, £20 for three courses. All major credit cards.

Vong Fort Guardian



Clipped By:
ianlharris
Sat, Nov 19, 2022