

This week: eating weeds in New York (the best dinner I've had there in a long time) and Vong without the throng



Matters of taste

Andrew Lloyd Webber

There was much talk in New York last week about weeds. I am not referring to the target of the acres of think-pieces regarding tobacco companies and their plight. I speak of weeds of the edible variety.

The American language has, of course, now become so completely different to ours in meaning and sound that if you see a headline about edible weeds you brace yourself for an article that could be about practically anything.

For instance, and I promise you this story is true, the other morning I received a call from my US theatre office. A meeting about the future of *By Jeeves* had ended in a rout.

"Of whom?" I wondered. The show was happily playing in Washington, or at least so I thought. Had my chaps been vanquished by a consortium of greedy theatre owners?

"No, we have a big long rout."

I was baffled. "We rout for a short time in New York and end up routing in Chicago."

Now *Chicago* is the big hit on Broadway this season. It seems most unfair that Bertie and co should be causing mayhem in its vicinity.

"We can't do that."

"Of course we can," was the reply. "We have a huge rout on our hands."

The penny dropped. "I think I understand you. You mean a route."

"No, a root is something you eat. You write too much about food these days."

My theatre man spoke with an air of quiet desperation.

And so it went on, rather in the manner of the conversation with a waitress that I reported a while back about egg beaters, which I had wrongly presumed were wire whisks.

The reason for all this excitement in New York about weeds is Jean-Georges, the new flagship restaurant of Jean-Georges Vongerichten. His claim to fame this side of the pond is Vong in the Berkeley Hotel, of which more anon.

Jean-Georges is the talk of New York and rightly so. It has just received the maximum rating of the *New York Times* and tables are currently more difficult to obtain than a private audience with the Pope.

The restaurant is housed on the ground floor of Donald Trump's golden gaudy new hotel at the south end of Central Park West. There is a wooden-floored bar and

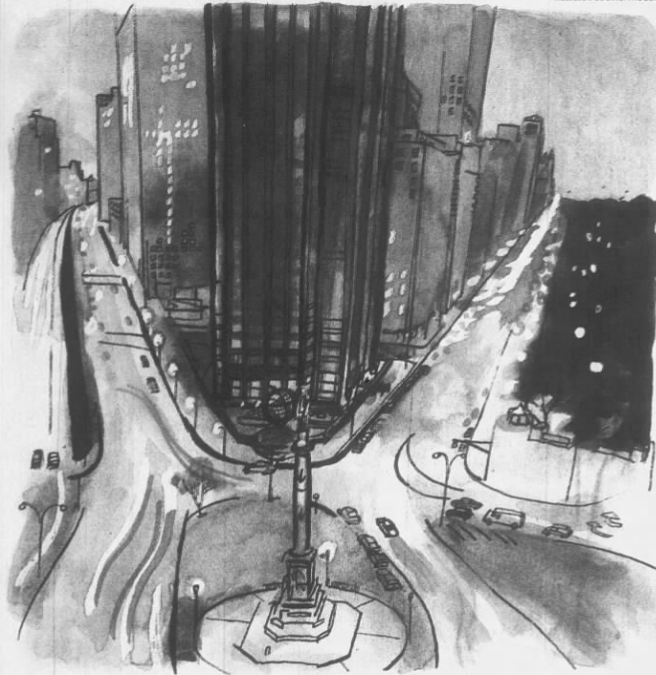


Illustration: LUCINDA ROGERS

Jean-Georges, Central Park West, New York, where 'tables are more difficult to obtain than a private audience with the Pope'

cafe through which you pass to the tall and vast modishly minimalist room which houses the proper nosherie.

Lighting is subdued, the service is professional but delightfully informal and, worryingly, only two lavatories — I mean rest-rooms — make do for the not inconsiderable throng for Vong.

Jean-Georges is massively about weeds, or wild and not so wild herbs to you and I. Mr Vongerichten has consulted François Couplan, who has become celebrated in France for his cataloguing and cultivation of wild herbs of all descriptions.

M Couplan claims that there are 2,500

edible plants in the United States and that so far only a quarter are really known. Mr Vongerichten's are cultivated on a two-acre plot in Newburgh, NY. The result at his restaurant is an astonishing, beguiling and kaleidoscopic range of tastes that frequently mislead you when you try to guess what is what in the flavouring department.

The nearest approach to this bravura use of greenery and spices that I have encountered in this country is Keith Read's antics at the Leatherne Bottel in Goring-on-Thames, Berkshire.

A spicy lobster mousse in a deep-fried zucchini flower kicked off a faultless dinner in a style more in the spicy manner of Vong than the rest of Jean-Georges's outpourings. There was a terrific porcini tart with onion and walnut. The dressing for the salad tasted lemony but in fact the flavour came from wood sorrel.

Sea scallops came coated with a raisin emulsion that was sweet yet subtle. Duck came with beetroot and was spiced with cinnamon and coriander. It came with a jus made from a reduction of duck bones slightly sweetened with honey.

Rack of lamb came with a herb crust. There was a livery-tasting blend of garlic mustard leaves, lamb's brains and bread-crumbs. This was an outstanding combi-

nation, as was boiled squab with a zesty onion compote with foie gras. A lobster tartine served with pea shoots and a lobster broth, which had been infused with pumpkin and fenugreek seeds overnight was totally original.

Proceedings drew to a close with a splendid roasted pear. Were Queen Anne's Lace seeds involved? It would not surprise me, as I tried some once and they taste a bit like pear. Further, he owns up to them in his *crème brûlée*.

Needless to say, everything else was stunning, from bread to petits fours and a round flat biscuit with preserved kiwi fruit in the middle that looked like an edible gaming chip.

Vongerichten is involved in several other ventures in Manhattan, as well as his Vong in London and an imminent Vong in Hong Kong. So it is to be hoped that all these enterprises do not lure him from his foraging patch in upstate New York — it is not every day you taste a herb like sassafras or purslane. The former is like a cross between a joss-stick and root beer.

The wine list is long, expensive and French orientated for this city. With all these exotic and new flavours, you could spend forever marrying the right wines with the right dish.

This was the best and most exciting rollercoaster of a dinner I have had in New York in a long time. I just wish I knew more about how this cooking is created. Reckon a good \$75 (£46) a head with one of the cheaper wines.

By complete coincidence my first lunch invitation back on these shores was to Vong in the Berkeley Hotel.

I went there just after it opened more than a year ago and had been rather irritated by the place.

It is the sort of joint that has cramped tables down the middle of the room into which you squeeze the rich and powerful who are not famous faces. Thus they can all fall over each other and imagine they are instantly recognisable.

However, at my lunch the place was a rather deserted shadow of its former seething self. The food, though, was considerably better than at my last visit.

I was not wild about a warm peanut dip with super-light rice cakes, because I am not wild about peanuts.

But I was much taken by the prawn satay which was a prawn wrapped in a deep-fried mousse, rather like the freebie at Jean-Georges. Lobster roll was dull and veering towards the over-chilled but a quail in a barbecue goo was stuff kids would die for, and no worse for that.

Sea bass with confit tomato came with sweetcorn in a sauce based on chicken stock, with lemon-grass for once used sparingly. It was a simple dish but very impressive.

I enjoyed a youthful-tasting dry Australian Chardonnay from Shaw & Smith from the southern region. Lunch with wine was about £40 a head. There is a £45 tasting menu if you are so inclined.

If you fancy dining between six and seven you can get away with a "black plate" menu at £17.50, whatever that means.

● Jean-Georges, 1 Central Park West, New York (001 212 239 3900).

● Vong, Wilton Place, London, SW1 (0171 255 1010).

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Clipped By:
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Sat, Nov 19, 2022