



Eating out Giles Coren

“The Italian truffle had travelled just as far as we had to be here”

The first time I went to El Bulli, back in October 2002, I did a lot of preparatory reading to get myself in the zone for a meal at the Best Restaurant in the World. I wanted to know what to order and how to eat it, where it came from and what it meant. When you're eating at the Best Restaurant in the World, you don't just rock up around eight, order, gobble, sweat, fart, giggle and leave.

And I remember reading a lot about how important the journey was, at least according to El Bulli's chef/prop, Ferran Adrià. There was the flight (for most people) to Barcelona, then the three-hour drive to Rosas on the French border, then the rocky, potholed, apparently interminable road up a mountain, through the duskscape of bent, black, sea-blasted trees, the dead man's curve in the road down to the restaurant, and eventually the warm glow of Adrià's hobbit-hole mecca at the edge of the sea.

Such a journey, claimed the chef, was a fitting overture and necessary preparation for the meal. It provided time to clear the mind of clutter

and the palate of pointless preconceptions, to whet the appetite with a little pathfinder's anxiety. You've waited two, maybe three years for a table. You can wait a little longer.

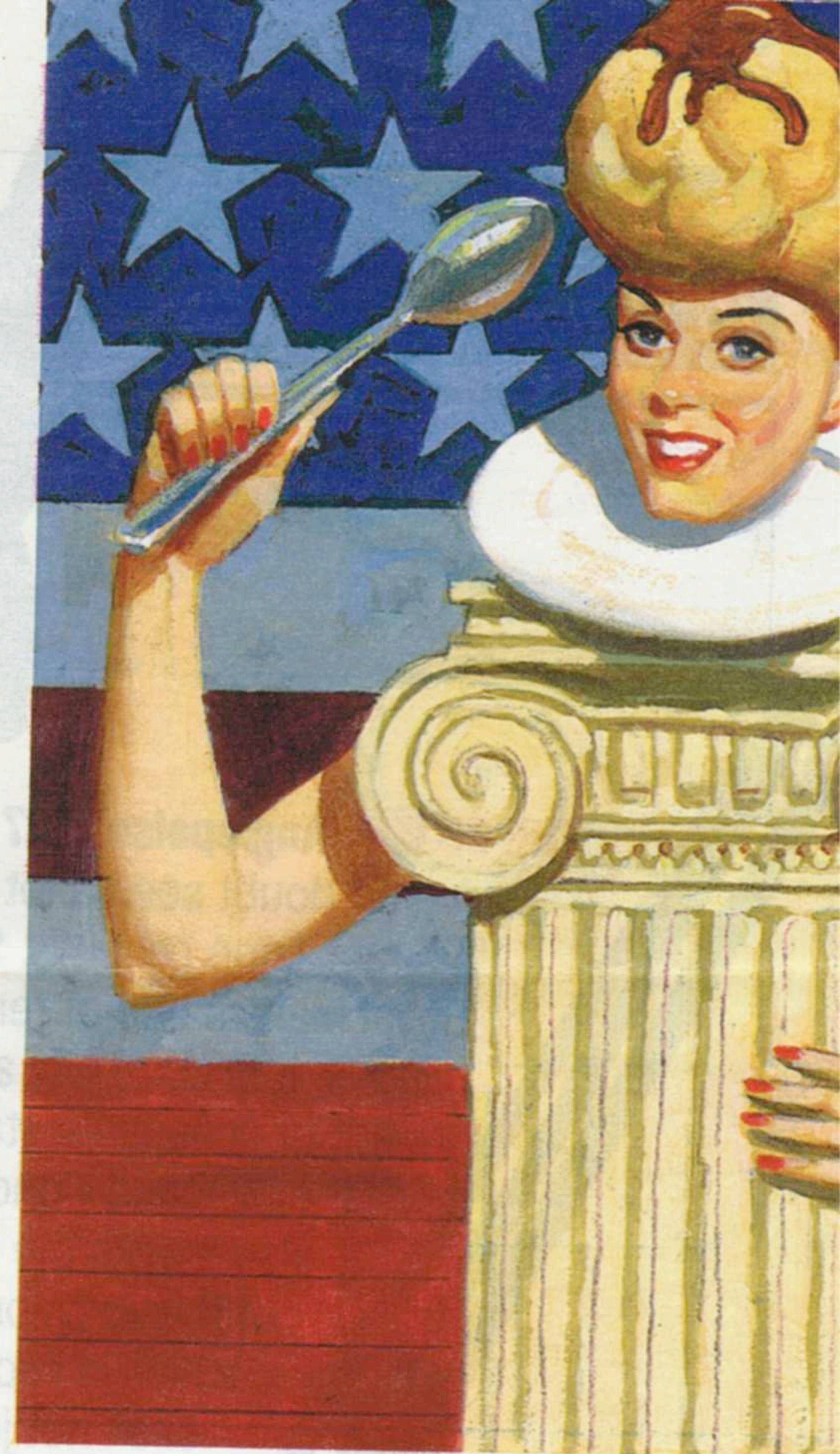
Well, I waited even longer than that for the French Laundry. Six, getting on for seven years, right from the first weeks after I reviewed El Bulli and everyone set about gleefully informing me that I'd got it all wrong and should have gone to California.

Indeed, in the two years after I returned from Rosas, the Laundry twice beat El Bulli to the No 1 spot in the annual World's 50 Best Restaurants survey, compiled by *Restaurant* magazine from the votes of a million slobbering British food bores, fill-in critics and freesheet liggers who have never been to either.

My journey there at the end of last year made the El Bulli trip seem like a curry jaunt down the high street: 11 hours to San Francisco, a week to acclimatise and conquer the jet lag, then a long drive upstate in our hired Ford Mustang to a hotel in the Napa Valley, and from there a half-hour cab ride into Yountville.

And in this case, I think, it didn't do the target restaurant any favours. The week in San Francisco, when we ate out very heavily indeed (as described here last week), made such a joyful change from gastronomic life in England that the Laundry was going to have to do an awful lot more to impress me than if I had come to it cold from the surly, overpriced, clip-joint culture of London.

On the morning of our dinner reservation, we drove out of San Fran with the roof down, shades on, singing in the sunshine, to a hotel called the Auberge du Soleil, a Xanadu of



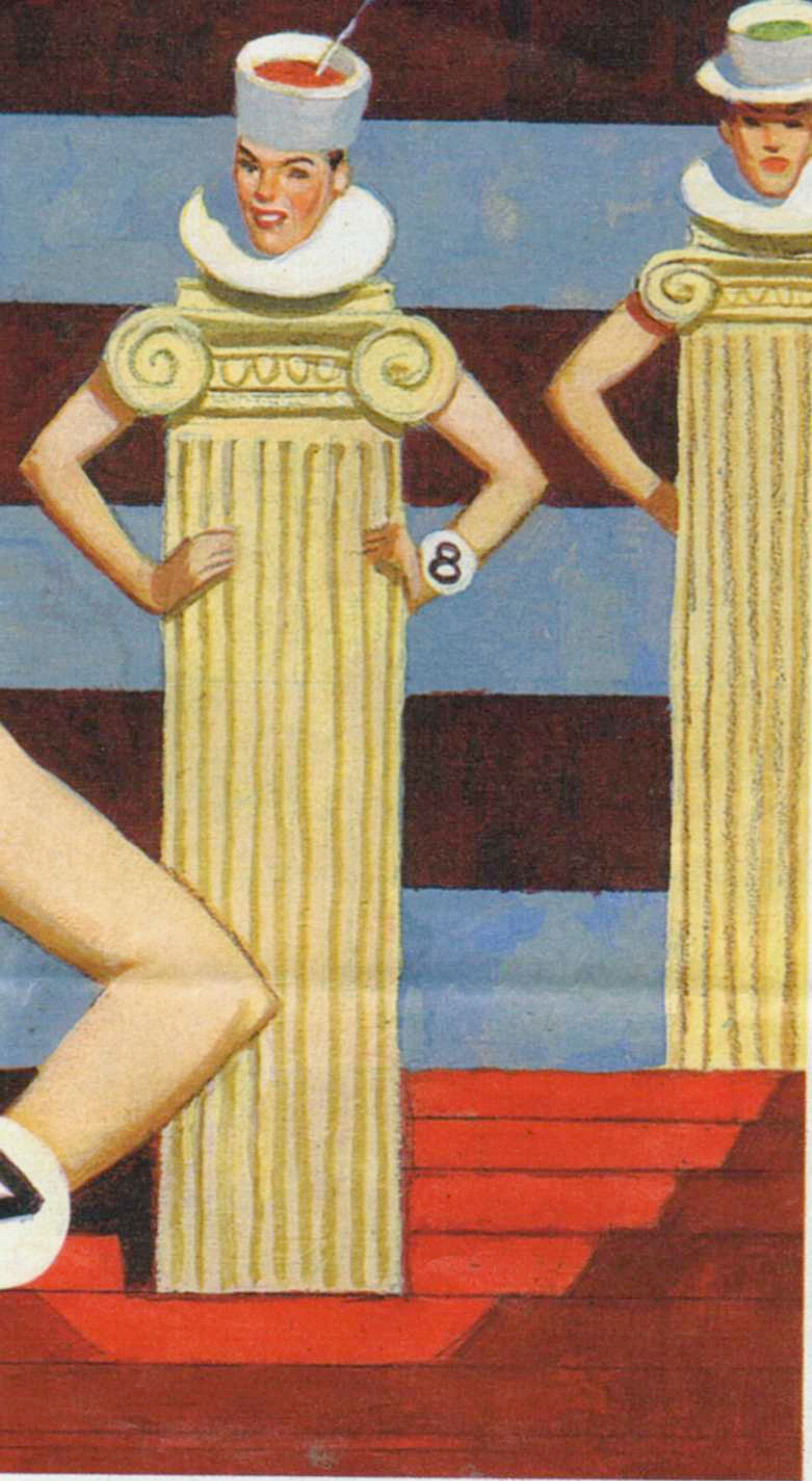
sprawling condominiums on a tropical hillside. We camped by the vast, shimmering pool, hugging ourselves at the contrast with London, the heart-pumping thrill of white heat on our skin in the bleak midwinter, and rather overdid it on the mojitos, the 6 per cent local beers, the perfect cobb salads and flinty Napa Valley sauvignons... Then woke around seven, a little sun-blasted and confused, showered quickly, ironed our clothes, and made a groggy dash for the Best Restaurant in the World.

There was, as I'd expected, relatively little fanfare: just a quiet, dimly lit, greyish sort of a room full of wealthy middle-class paunchsters at nicely dressed tables. The chef's tasting menu looked to contain about 15 courses, presumably with a lot of diddly free stuff chucked in between, so we green-lit that and started on the 2000 Moët, with which they were more than generous.

— Pretty soon, the expected procession of clever canapés began: a profiterole filled with mornay sauce and gruyère, a cornet of something, different little soups for each of us (pumpkin with cranberries in the bottom for Esther, artichoke for me), and then caviar, mine scooped into a quenelle with a pearl tapioca and poached oysters, Esther's piled on to a cauliflower panna cotta. In both cases, bland, firmly textured partners very successfully set off the salty egg flavour that we diners at the Best Restaurant in the World know so well.

The French Laundry





The Giles Files

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Dear Giles

I don't BELIEVE it: Devon is mentioned at last (Jan 3). I know it's the wrong bit of Devon, but I'm still cockahoop (old Devon expression). For the past four years, I've been yapping on at you about coming down to Totnes to visit a three-tiered selection of eateries – a restaurant in Plymouth (a miracle in itself), an organic farm restaurant with a proper chef (ex-River Café), and the fish and cheese and wine at Sharpham's, all produced in the Dart valley or the sea at the end of it. You've got to come. It's madness not to. The whole country's going down the plughole except Devon.

Jane Parsons

Giles

You should review Barton Services at Junction 56 off the A1(M), which I found by accident. It is not a Little Chef, a Moto, Granada or any other corporate motorway stopover; it is a Sixties-style transport caff, so authentic that if it was off the M25 they'd charge you museum admission. Last time I was there you got sausage, egg and chips (and I think a mug of tea, the Tetley's Grand Cru 2008) for 99p. The ambience is superb, with sauce bottles on Formica tables and a view of the lorry park outside. And there are shower rooms: how many restaurants have you been to, Giles, where you can have a shower?

Adrian Gardiner, Scotland

Dear Sir

Bocca di Lupo (Jan 10) sounds great. Although the literal translation is, as you wrote, mouth of the wolf, the expression "in bocca di lupo" is used to wish someone good luck.

Patricia White

Dear Mr Coren

I hadn't been to the Gay Hussar for the best part of 20 years until this week. Does it provide the most dreadful food in London? I don't know of any venue that provides worse. And yet it was packed. Some things in life remain a mystery.

D. Smith

E-mail wordofmouth@thetimes.co.uk

By now we were doing a lot of pushing away. If they'd offered us just the caviar, the truffled gnocchi and the excellent beef we might have left feeling properly pampered, but four hours in and still staring at five or six pudding courses to come, you just want to go home. Or shoot yourself. So we grabbed the bill (\$840 – £570 – for the tasting menu plus wine pairings, with the \$300 truffle supplement deducted, presumably for good behaviour), bunked out early, and bolted for the hotel.

Funnily enough, the meal we had the next day, at another of Thomas Keller's restaurants (he has four or five in little old Yountville, dotted along the lazy highway), was, at a seventh of the price, a lot more remarkable.

Ad Hoc is a "family-style" restaurant offering a four-course, no-choice, nightly menu with a no-bookings policy at the bar. We were lucky enough to hit it on fried chicken night, when a big, shaven-headed biker called Dan laid up for us on the bar top first a salad dressed with two blue cheeses, apple, toasted walnuts, celery and slivers of pink pickled onion, then a whole two-and-a-half pound chicken, which had been brined for 12 hours, jointed into seven pieces, washed in buttermilk, coated in breadcrumbs and deep-fried to howling, coppery perfection.

The awesome bird was served with Brussels sprouts, peppers and lardons and the best butternut squash purée ever, followed by cheese, stunning sourdough from Keller's Bouchon bakery, pears poached in mulled wine, and terrific coffee.

The restaurant is vast, cool and airy with huge, widely spaced tables, sharp linens, and monumental but surprisingly chic flower arrangements that form a cute juxtaposition to the scratchy, brown, Macky D's-style overalls of the staff.

And Thomas Keller himself clearly shares my taste, for halfway through our meal he sauntered in – lowering, cadaverous, slightly scary – drew up a stool at the bar and chowed down.

I will never persuade you to travel halfway round the globe for fried chicken, but if you do ever decide that 15 overhyped courses and an excess of bourgeois fiddle is somehow worth the journey, then do yourself a favour: make like that chicken and cross the road. ■

The French Laundry

6640 Washington Street, Yountville, California
(00 1 707 944 2380)

Score: 7

Ad Hoc

6476 Washington Street, Yountville, California
(00 1 707 944 2487)

Score: 9

Auberge du Soleil

180 Rutherford Hill Road, Rutherford, California
(00 1 707 963 1211)

There was a truffle interlude which began with the presentation of a mahogany casket containing a great white knuckle of Italian fungus that had travelled just as far as we had to be here and was, obviously, sublime when grated generously over coddled eggs with brioche soldiers, then perfect tagliatelle, and then on to nicely browned, meaty little home-made gnocchi.

But blown away we never were. Dishes were perfect examples of familiar things (wafer-sliced veal heart; foie gras pâté with six different kinds of very posh salt; lobster claw cooked but not "cooked" by sous-vide; milk-fed capon transmogrified by the same science into something like warm milk chocolate; a kind of American kobe beef that was "one step up from wagyu" and wobbled like a small slice of very fat lady's thigh), but they were not, as at El Bulli, expressions of a whole new language. There were none of those Catalan giggles at frozen foie gras grated into iron filings that melted, solidified and liquefied all at once in your mouth, or "tagliatelle" made from set consommé or rose-petal tempura tasting of sautéed summer breezes.

One attempt at such a dish, the sea urchin on sake granita, was a proper vomit-out rotter and, I'm sorry, but a man who lives 45 minutes from the Fat Duck is simply not going to write poems home about a shiso-leaf sorbet with chocolate. "Yes, yes, funny ice-cream," said Esther, and pushed it away.