

French *connection*

After 30 years of serving New Plymouth diners a little bit of France, Andre Teissonniere is hoping for a rest. Witt journalism student Greta Cleary looks at how it all began and what will happen when the man behind L'Escargot says au revoir.

BAD starts bring a sense of déjà vu for Andre Teissonniere. To go back to the beginning we need to take a stroll down the hill on Devon St East, New Plymouth, in 1975.

It's a dark evening in May. A stranger with an oo-la-la accent has opened an innovative restaurant that competes for diners with the Tong, La Scala and Ping's Pie Cart.

By day it is an austere coffee shop. By night the tables, made out of cheap board, are transformed by gingham cloths and candlelight.

It is dark and romantic like a film noir.

The rouge ceiling and French music entice the bohemian and bourgeois alike, who are hunting for sophistication and something fresh.

A 'Bonjour' from the restaurateur adds to the feeling of briefly leaving for a foreign adventure.

A raucous group of six people enter to dine. It doesn't take long before their behaviour has a young waitress in tears.

The fiery owner storms out to the aid of his distressed employee and tells the group to pay their bill and f**k off.

In the days that follow, a letter to the editor appears in the paper from the diners who can't believe the nerve of their host.

Fellow chefs question the identity of said restaurateur.

It was Andre.

His establishment had only been open three weeks.

He later found out those diners actually worked for the newspaper.

"I didn't start off very well," he says with a shrug, wry grin and still-thick French accent.

C'est la vie.

Seven years later in 1982, Andre L'Escargot moved to Brougham St.

The May opening night happened to be close to Andre's 34th birthday.

A band and about 60 invited friends filled the stylish eatery, along with other diners keen to experience elegance.

Someone had brought in a birthday cake, which Andre shared with his friends - only to find later it belonged

to someone else dining that night.

"I know who it is, too, and I don't think he's ever forgiven me," he laughs.

Despite these faux pas Andre has managed to survive for more than 30 years in what can be an unforgiving and fad-filled industry.

Sitting in the closed restaurant at his table by the window, arms folded across his chest until it's time to light another cigarette, he talks about letting it all go.

The restaurant was put on the market in June last year.

He has no regrets and he wouldn't do anything differently.

And he hasn't considered returning to France.

Even after 35 years adrift from his home country, Andre still looks decidedly French with his olive skin and thin, greying moustache.

At 9 o'clock in the morning he is dressed casually in a grey-and-white striped T-shirt and shorts as he talks about how he came to be in New Plymouth.

There is no sense of nostalgia or philosophy - there's no going back and it's as simple as that.

Born in Paris, Andre grew up in his parents' hotel in Montpellier in the south of France.

When he left school, he went to work for them doing anything and everything, from answering phones to cooking.

He left the hotel to work as a chef in Scotland where he met a girl from Ekethuna.

They got engaged in Edinburgh. She brought him home to New Zealand and he brought French cuisine.

They did marry but are no longer together and Andre is not one to talk about past liaisons.

He cooked his way around New Zealand until he reached New Plymouth and decided he had the expertise to start his own restaurant.

Back then, he was motivated by a desire for good service - and still is.

However, he says the service in New Zealand is still not up to scratch and that's disappointing.

"There are a lot more establishments and a lot more choice but a lot of places

overcharge and the service is poor."

His high standards are revealed during a phone call to a wine company that has failed to supply what he needs, yet again.

His face reddens and accent thickens before bellowing he doesn't need them and hangs up the phone.

"If I ran my business that way then I wouldn't still be here," he says matter-of-factly.

When he first opened in New Plymouth, he left the matter of taste in wine up to the customer.

"In the beginning we were BYO so we didn't have

any problems. We only used some wine for cooking, but it wasn't hard to get hold of," he says.

"Now we can serve lots of good wine."

There's that verb again - serve, which leads to the all-important noun,

service. Andre has a lot of clientele from overseas and says one of the first

things he hears is their displeasure about the service they have received - especially in the hospitality industry.

"We try and encourage people to come to New Zealand and they always talk about the beautiful scenery and poor service."

Maybe, he says, Kiwis are a bit laid back, or a bit cocky, but he is quick to say that's a generalisation.

"I like to run a tight ship and that's the same with my life in general."

He expects the best from his staff as well.

"Sometimes you have to teach people how to eat properly first before you can even train them to do their job," he says, referring to etiquette.

The quality of service at L'Escargot is one of the things that bring people back - and will be missed.

Good mate Mike Meagher says Andre's retirement will be a loss to New Plymouth and the restaurant trade. "You have to be dedicated to survive 30 years."

Leaving will be hard on Andre, too, says Mike, because he likes the company of the diners and gets on with people from all walks of life.

Mike met Andre 20 years ago when his bakery supplied bread to the restaurant.

"We don't supply anymore - business and friendship don't mix and we are still great friends."

Andre was famous in the Meagher household for popping round to cook Saturday lunch.

"He can turn simple things into the most amazing dish."

One of the most memorable was a meal that included caramelised onions with fresh greens and fresh bread and black pudding.

Another came from seasonal pickings. "We had a fig tree down the

back and he used the figs. He grilled them I think and he used fig leaves to cook fish in," Mike says.

"The list goes on, but it was always stuff we had in the fridge. It was something a bit different. Figs are a strange thing to cook." Mike rates

Andre as the leading restaurateur in town.

"He has a tremendous sense of style and puts a lot of thought into the business." He may have panache but he is not grandiose.

Two years ago, when Andre renovated his house, he finally bought a flash TV.

"I still had a little one with the rabbit ears," he says, grinning like a cat.

Just as much as the restaurant is Andre, it is everything to him.

A typical day starts at 7am.

He goes into the restaurant and organises supplies or whatever needs doing, then he goes for a swim at the Aquatic Centre and has lunch.

"Then it's time for a siesta."

In the early evening he goes back to the restaurant for the night to greet his customers and keep an eye on things.

There is a glint of uncertainty in his eyes as he talks about L'Escargot being on the market. "I enjoy what I do, but it's time to put my feet up."

He plans to spend a bit of time in Australia with his children, Jean-Philippe, who has a son called Louis, and his daughter Cleo, who is expecting her first child next month. There is also a dream to build a holiday home in Bali.

It is one of his favourite places, but he tries to stay away from the tourists.

He enjoys the real experience of lunching with the locals in far-away villages and would like to have his own little bit of paradise. It's time to go at snail's pace.

FIVE QUESTIONS FOR ANDRE TEISSONNIERE

Do you believe in God? Yes

Where was the last place you went on holiday? Bali

What's your favourite sport? Swimming and surfing

What was the last movie you saw? La Vie En Rose

What would you save from a burning building? Photos of my grandchild.

