



'The *d'égustation* is of no importance. That sort of attitude won't get you far in the restaurant business but Elizabeth Furse occasionally has to remind her friends 'Darleeng, I am not a restaurateur.' As to what she is you will hear many opinions: there are many who

love her; some are exasperated by her but love her nevertheless, while others are just exasperated; some believe she is the rudest woman in London. She is certainly more discriminating than her customers, for they put up with more from her than she puts up with from

them. Actually, the food these days is going through a golden age and is perfectly edible. The safest rule for the newcomer (if she lets you in) is 'When in the Bistro do as Milton Shulman does', for Milton only eats when Elizabeth is not cooking. But the food

isn't the point anyway. You won't find Elizabeth's listed in any gastronomic guide or even in the telephone book. Her Bistro is on the wrong side of the tracks in Belgravia and hides behind the front of E. & P. Furse Ltd., Paintings, Engravings. It's a very odd place indeed



life is without beauty. She could be a duchess got up as a concierge or vice versa. She often wears black – mourning for Europe or for Englishmen? – but with gay jewellery. Her stockings are invariably laddered. She wears glasses pushed up from her face like goggles and, with thick raven hair, sometimes looks as if dressed for motor cycling. She moves freely between the more literate capitals of the world (she appears to be fluent in all known languages) in the manner of a refugee, loaded down with newspaper parcels, old shopping bags and vegetable produce. Her hobby is 'being there when history is made.' She dashes off to wars, revolutions and elections, if not in the earthy flesh at least in the excitable spirit. She once went to America to plead with the Pentagon for the life of her children and she was supposed to be going to China by train but I don't think she did. When I was in Paris for the elections this year there was a disturbance in the hall of my hotel and there was Elizabeth with her newspaper parcels. She judges ideas by the people who express them, she worships the printed word but seldom reads it. She oscillates emotionally and noisily between wild misinformation and error and almost cruelly penetrating truth and perception, mostly about people and particularly about the English. In SW3 she performs the useful function of a Mittel European poltergeist.

She was born grandly, somewhere in what used to be Estonia. She chose poverty and Communism. There were three choices in the thirties, she says, 'to be a lady, a Fascist or a Communist.' She has now solved the dilemma by being a bit of all three. She was 'a good militant Communist' in Paris until the end of the Spanish War. She won't say half of what she knows about that period, nor about her war record – escape from camps, British Intelligence, French Resistance, and working for the famous 'pipeline' through Marseilles. She twice married Englishmen and is an overpowering mother of five. She worked as a continuity girl with Renoir in Paris, with Korda and Reed in London. She holds card number 35 in the Association of Cinematograph, Television and Allied Technicians. She would like to be a writer but she talks too much. She started running the Bistro in 1951.

The second husband was an Old Etonian artist, a talented painter, enamellist and teacher but enough of a gentleman to desist from any activity which was in danger of proving too successful. The antique shop at No. 3 Bourne Street was never in danger of success and E. & P. Furze Ltd. had its best week, according to Elizabeth, when it actually sold '£4 worth of bits and pieces.' So she opened up in the evenings with coffee, cakes, chess and newspapers in the Vienna manner. But Chelsea wasn't Vienna and the blue-jeaned set of those days didn't read and didn't play chess. So she tried food, a real bistro – hopefully conceived by

Elizabeth as 'a sort of mini-Café Royal.' That was the era of the really bad food. Clement Freud instructed Elizabeth in the omelette but from the haute of his cuisine at the Royal Court wrote off her establishment as 'that place where fifteen live off five couverts'. But the upper classes rallied round the distressed gentlefolk and queued up to eat the stuck-together spaghetti. That was Elizabeth's smart period, but she still hadn't found her bistro. It was around the mid-fifties that it began to work. A young generation of writers, journalists, theatre and television people, diplomats and politicians drove the smarties from the plush benches onto the wooden stools. You had to have something of your own, beauty if not brain, charm if not conversation – it didn't matter what you had providing she spotted it as something real. And as fast as they came Elizabeth drove them away with her rudeness until, by this process of unnatural selection, there were, most nights of the week, 35 people who could stand up for themselves in argument and stand Elizabeth. She overcharged the rich and undercharged the poor, sat on the famous and encouraged the unknown. Princess Margaret's escort was told that if she came in she would have to be Margaret not Ma'am – 'There's only one Madam here,' said Elizabeth. Tony Armstrong Jones, however, was acceptable and a regular. 'Who are you, who sent you to me?' she would shout at anybody so bold as to seek to favour her with their casual custom. But, of course, the harder it was to graduate to being a customer of the Bistro the more applicants there were.

It's much quieter these days although Elizabeth makes no concessions. She will turn customers away from empty tables if they don't strike her as belonging to her world. Her young men of the fifties return but the young men of the sixties haven't come to her in the same number. It is no longer the famous place it was. Elizabeth says she has failed, except in supporting her children who, when it comes to paying the bill at the Bistro, appear to be in incessant need of shoes. 'I thought there would be 25 people in a city of nine million who would want to come to a small place to meet their adversaries and friends, to come as equals and free people – as *what* they are, not *who* they are – to air their minds and their hearts. That was the bistro of my dream, darling. But there are not enough.' But there would never be enough to staff Elizabeth's ideal society and a bistro is a bistro, an important but modest place, always there, always the same, never empty, never too full, never too exciting, never too dull. It must still be there, after no matter how many years, and Elizabeth is still there, as familiar as yesterday. Her people come back from their failures and successes and between their marriages. They can count on there always being somebody they know to talk to and on Elizabeth always being herself, which is the hard task she sets for other people.

DAVID MONTGOMERY

for London—a club of a kind, a hide-away, an emotional *poste restante*, a debating society, a womb to climb back into, an intellectuals' employment exchange and a Salvation Army soup kitchen for down-and-out Etonians, or – in other words – a *bistro*, which is a

description of a state of mind not a catering establishment.

Elizabeth herself is much harder to describe. She's either potty or dazzlingly sane. She sees herself in appearance as an ugly duckling which isn't quite right because no face with so much