

Regrets? Yes, but far too many to mention

DEAR God – I think I must have taken leave of my senses. Of all the places to eat in Hampstead and Highgate, why did I have to go to one of the very few restaurants within a hotel? Everyone knows that you never do that – unless it's Claridge's, say... but this, believe me, wasn't.

We are talking about the Brasserie Gerard, fronting the Premier Inn on Haverstock Hill – which is, I tremble to tell you, just one of 500 in the kingdom's largest hotel chain and run by Whitbread, which also owns the Costa coffee chain.

Yes: so why in blazes was I there? Well, we go way back, this hideous building and I. I'm old enough to remember when it was the Post House, long before it was something else and then the Holiday Inn – and I ate here an eon ago when the brasserie was a Marco Pierre White set-up (and pretty poorish too). On that occasion, Kate Moss was lunching with her parents, both of whom were eating food while the daughter was limiting herself to her then quite customary bottle or so of Veuve Clicquot, while filling up on fags (ah, happy golden days).

Also, my belief had been temporarily suspended by Gerard's current advertising: "The best steak frites this side of Paris – £7.95." Lordy, though – how empty a claim is that? In Paris, they try to fool you into ordering the cut they call "onglet" – and misguided foodies will tell you what a little known secret it is. Well, good – the less known the better: it tastes like a door wedge, basically, and takes even longer to chew. Think Charlie Chaplin in *The Gold Rush*, gnawing genteelly at his boiled-up boots.

When I booked, they repeated my surname back to me as "Carnally", which, given the steaky nature of the joint, is fair enough. (In Italian restaurants they pronounce it "Connolly", which conjures something plump like gnocchi).

The room is timeless, though not in a good way. It feels like any provincial hotel or minor airport lounge from 1976 onwards: the car park might have been packed with Ford Cortinas filled with cases of samples (one man's groovy retro is another man's sadly dated). Here we have the fizz and clank of "music" at just the pitch to ensure irritation, a slate floor and bare tables – paper napkins, with one's placemat in the form of a pudding menu, rather sweetly.

The restaurant adjoins a mournful bar tricked out like a conservatory, and there's a partially screened-off section to cater to the inevitable post-conference slap-up feed for whatever just still solvent corporation had block-booked a floor above. As we entered, my wife and I were met by the sound of raucous laughter, but we strove not to take it to heart.

We were there for dinner, and despite the much vaunted £7.95 steak frites being chalked up on blackboards (and the website's assurance that it was available day and night, Monday to Thursday), our waiter insisted that it was a lunchtime deal only.

OK... My wife ordered the special of the day – calves liver, smoked bacon, saute potatoes – but just as our starters were being served she was politely informed that they'd run out of all that. OK... So she tackled her starter: mushroom farci (as opposed to farcy, mercifully, which is a fatal disease of the horse and the ass).

Here we had a rather hard field

Our guest reviewer, the novelist **Joseph Connolly**, could not resist the tempting offer of 'the best steak frites this side of Paris' for just £7.95. Now, he wishes he had



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Joseph Connolly, far left, and, left, Brasserie Gerard. Main picture by Polly Hancock

mushroom with spinach and poached egg adrift on a good gallon of very cheesy sauce: not too bad, was the verdict, if rather impenetrable. My avocado with prawns came on a square plate (everything came on a square plate) and somewhere amid the leaves I detected half a very small avocado, just this side of frozen, with not too many bog standard Atlantic prawns, these well camouflaged by a curiously bitter Marie Rose sauce (they said it had cognac in it, and you had to believe them).

This was £5.95 – just two quid shy of the special steak frites they wouldn't let me have. OK... I did have another sort of steak, though – sirloin ("faux filet", they called it, rather bizarrely) but this was £17.95, and more than strange. It seemed so dense, very solid and rather crunchy, as if it had somehow been carved from an unyielding cube of the stuff the size of a small London house.

Green beans were good and al dente, but the frites were the usual bought-in and therefore not quite fresh and chewy things – undistinguishable from those at KFC across the road. Talking of which, the half chicken my wife had in lieu of what she actually wanted to eat had once been, the menu informed us, "free to roam". Ah, but then alas it had had its Bus Pass revoked and was summarily split asunder and hammered with a brick.

It was cooked through, but it didn't seem so – the texture was quite close to blubbery; my wife identified rosemary and thyme – but, she said, they came in turns...

The chaps in the post-conference part of the room had clearly got to the speeches by this time, and were unwittingly encouraging: each time one of us managed another mouthful we were rewarded with a round of applause. It was

bolstering, somehow – restored morale, gave one the courage to continue. I was even waxing nostalgic about good old Berni Inns – and so the fact that my sauce was spelled "Bernaise" could only be oddly warming. Except that it was very cold, curdled, vinegary and £1.47 extra. OK... The attentive manager – seemingly fresh from his 14th birthday party – offered to ask chef to stick it in the microwave. I passed.

The life-saver was a recommended bin-end Chateau Notton 2004 – the second wine of the esteemed Margaux Branc-Cantenac, and a snip at £24, which is the price from a wine merchant. Oh, and the pudding – we shared a cherry and almond tartlet which was pretty good, although the vanilla ice cream owed more to Wall's than Haagen-Dazs. Ironically – because I think they had somehow intuited my general dissatisfaction – this was thrown in free.

So what to say? Well the Gerard chain says this: "We are the best in fine French cuisine." This is such palpable nonsense as to be almost indictable (leaving Le Gavroche where, exactly?). And these days, should you style yourself a brasserie, you will be judged by the finest: if you added £15 to the frankly ludicrous bill of £75.59 (with service, without pudding) you could dine superbly at the best in London: The Wolseley.

But in this place... well, you could, I suppose, just pop in for a bin-end claret and a cherry tartlet – but you won't, will you? Because unlike me, you haven't taken leave of your senses.

□ Joseph Connolly's latest novel is *Jack the Lad and Blood Mary*, Faber and Faber £7.99.

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