

Guest food reviewer **Joseph Connolly** takes a trip down memory lane to see if Villa Bianca is as he remembers it



What have the Italians given us?

ITALY, eh? Quite apart from what, as the Pythons had it, the Romans ever did for us, there's Venice, Vivaldi – and, rather more to the point, vitello, vermicelli and Valpolicella: Italian cuisine, in a nutshell. Oh, also they gave us the Mafia, of course, and in one episode of *The Sopranos* I recall some big-quiffed slack-mouthed assassin referring to Mr Obama's recently acquired residence as the "Villa Bianca".

But to us locals, though, this can only mean one thing: the very pretty and perfectly located restaurant in Perrin's Court at the heart of Hampstead village. It has been delighting regulars since 1969 (although they're making no fuss at all about their 40th birthday). The word of mouth about this place, though, is not always good: the general vox pop seems to be, oh, yawn, yawn, it's still there, just so-so, and way overpriced. Well it never used to be that – so what's going on there these days?

Well rather a lot, in terms of bustle: by 8.45 on a Tuesday evening in March the ground floor was completely full, very loud, and still the punters kept coming. They were directed to the upstairs section (not so jolly), where a medley of favourites was being tinkled away at on a baby grand by a contented-looking Latin in a scarlet satin shirt and a little black waistcoat; he would not have looked out of place clacking on a pair of castanets, a rose gripped firmly between his jaws.

And there were roses – a red one to every table. Proper cloths and napkins, a variety of good Italian bread, tomatoey nibbles and packets of grissini. The welcome was warm and professional, the menu enormous – nearly 20 starters, 16 pasta dishes, 20 meat, 15 fish... good grief.

My wife eventually plumped for prosciutto San Daniele with "mozzarella dumplings". What, we wondered, can they be...? Well, it was just absolute balls, quite frankly. Of mozzarella, I mean: nothing dumpling about it. The quantity of excellent dry and melting prosciutto was huge (all the portions here are very generous) and my grilled scallops on the inescapable bed of spinach were as succulent as you want them to be – though pricy, I suppose, at £12.50.

We had a bottle of the house red – always a sound bet in an Italian place, though risky elsewhere – which turned out to



Villa Bianca in Perrin's Court, Hampstead.

Picture by Polly Hancock

be a decent Sangiovese for £14.

Did I say it was loud? Dear God. Marble floor, half-marble walls and a happy crowd braying their lungs out. I asked my wife what she thought of her main course – wide ribbons of pasta in a duck ragu: no, I don't think it's too warm in here, she replied, quite equably. I tasted it: meaty and yummy – claggy in a good way. Then she asked me a question. "What...?" I said – and she repeated it. "What...?" I said. Oh dear. I was close to getting her to write it down. I assured her anyway that my house special – pollo Villa Bianca – was quite excellent: a large tender chicken breast with a well-judged wine and brandy sauce studded with mushrooms and peppers. "What...?" she said, perplexed. Never mind.

There were also enough saute potatoes for three or four people but I liked them, so I ate the lot. The zucchini fritti were a mild disappointment – cut into strips and just not crunchy.

During the pause before pud, I had a look around. Did I say it was loud? Dear God. A lot of the din seemed to be attributable to a sole American woman – remarkable really, as it all seemed to be emanating from just the one nostril.

The same old leather bucket

FACTFILE

- **Villa Bianca**, 1 Perrin's Court, NW3 1QS
- Telephone: 020-7435 3131
- Food: ★★★★★
- Service: ★★★★★
- Open seven days a week, noon-3.30pm, 7-11.30pm.
- Cost: Starters £6.50 to £16, mains £12.50-£22.

seats were as comfy as ever, the walls still bianca, the false slatted ceiling half-concealing spotlights that I think are meant to light the forgettable art, but in fact are rather dazzling to the eye. It's as close to a restaurant in Italy as you could feasibly get – and a mixed bunch of people, though tending towards the 30-somethings, with a sprinkling of white and older heads, which no doubt have been gorging here for decades.

We ordered, to share, a black and white chocolate mousse. Wasn't black and white – it was fawn and cream, and quite toothachingly sweet: like a melange of everyone's last Rolo, whereupon some wiseacre had thought, oh, what the hell, and yelled out with gusto. "The Milky Bars are on me!" and duly added them to the mix.

The head waitress... oh, I haven't mentioned her, have I? Perfectly delightful, in a figure-hugging black tuxedo skirt-suit and high-heeled patents and groovy glasses – a secretary right out of *Mad Men*, really. Anyway, she was most concerned that we hadn't eaten our kiddies' choccy treat – but you feel a bit of a fool, don't you? Saying it's over-sweet. You imagine them wandering away and spitting through gritted teeth, "Well of course it's sweet – it's a sweet, isn't it, you moron? What do you want? Sour? Acid? You want it with salt...?!"

Ah well. She was further mortified when I queried the bill: two bottles of wine, two bottles of water, when we had had only one of each. Quickly rectified – but the total was still just shy of £90. Not cheap, then – but not just so-so either: this was a very good meal indeed in a restaurant clearly catering to a clientele for whom the credit simply isn't crunching (in common with my zucchini fritti).

We staggered home, replete. The trouble with Italian food, of course, is that after a week, you're hungry again.

■ *Joseph Connolly's latest novel, Jack the Lad and Bloody Mary, is published by Faber and Faber priced £8.99.*



Winona Holl.

Picture by Polly Hancock

Delicious way with words

IF THE price I have to pay for eating great biscuits is to call them cookies then, I for one, am willing to pay the price.

Winona Holl, a winner in last year's Archant food and drink awards, is kindly sharing with us one her family traditions from the US – in the form of cookie dough.

While most of us are used to buying ready-cooked biscuits, the Americans, when not making their own cookies, buy the dough and cook up a batch to have them fresh.

Winona, her husband and three children made their way to Muswell Hill via a three-year stint in New Zealand, where her husband, an animation director, worked on the *Lord of the Rings*.

They made it to N10 in 2003.

"I've always baked," she said. "When I was growing up, my mother always involved us in the baking, and so for me it is part of the identity of being a mum – especially making cookies."

Now, from a humble start in her home kitchen, Winona is supplying Waitrose and Ocado, and is also making more ready-baked cookies.

In 2005, she started selling her cookie dough at the Alexandra Palace farmer's market and then, in 2007, after showing her wares at the natural and organics show at

Olympia, their first trade show, Waitrose showed an interest.

"We were well received there and we were approached by a few different brokers that deal with supermarkets, including Waitrose."

At this point – October 2007 – the home kitchen became impractical, so she moved into a former recording studio at the Chocolate Factory in Wood Green.

Things then started to move apace.

In November, they sent out their first delivery of cookie dough to Waitrose, quickly followed in February 2008 by her cakes, and by June they were supplying Waitrose cafes with ready-made biscuits.

"I wasn't going to bake. I felt that there were so many baked goods on the shelves that why would I want to compete with all those gazillion other products?"

For Winona, the future of her enterprise changes daily.

"At the moment we are going to focus on small and independent shops, where people are more willing to buy organic products, where we can do in-store demonstrations and get back in touch with the customers."

■ For more information go to www.winsonaorganic.com.

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