

A family affair to remember

HAVE you checked the rating at the end of the piece yet? I expect so – human nature really, when reviews are strewn with asterisks. So, yes – rather startling, isn't it? A clean sweep. The swagger of five unbroken stars – just like those that glinted on the bullet helmet of a cigar-chomping General Patton, while he was twirling his pearl-handled revolver.

And so now we know that this very splendid establishment is in line to receive the very reverse of a drubbing, let's just get down to business. First, though, we have to be clear that here is no further laurel, not yet another extravagant cockade in the already quite absurdly over-decorated tricorn of Gordon Ramsay: no no no.

His eponymous gaff at Claridge's has been so much reviewed that the other and more traditional restaurant has been largely overlooked. It is called, somewhat preposterously, The Foyer and Reading Room. I know other clubs and restaurants whose mighty spaces are variously entitled The Drawing Room, The Coffee Room, The Library, The Morning Room and The Conservatory – and while it is true to say that any dubbed The Lavatory or The Vomitorium would do far passed me by, it nonetheless does seem that the deeply literal Dining Room still is up for grabs.

And here's something else: I'd like to make clear that your treasured local paper did not foot the bill for the blow-out to come: what do you think I am? A banker? A bent politician? Some sort of, I don't know – fat cat?

So here we are – my wife, my son and myself – in the sparkling art deco splendour that is the entrance hall of Claridge's, the black-and-white chequerboard marble floor so very shiny it appears to be oiled: isn't, obviously – can't have an A-list clientele slithering about and thumping colliding like so many drunken ninepins (not at lunchtime, anyway).

And the reason we are here, eager and ready to push out a boat, is to celebrate my wife's 'significant' birthday. Well, it's not every day, is it? That your wife hits 21, so I thought OK then, let's go for it.

You walk across the Foyer part – all luxuriously pale and swagged and minty, this largely given over to tea and snackettes – then through to the Reading Room. It might be called this because it is both a serious and studious space, its highbrow ceiling supported by oxblood (if not Oxbridge) leather-covered columns, the suede creme brulee walls studded with large framed photographs of visiting Royals and other worthies, these in turn punctuated by pewter deco sconces.

Or maybe it's the Reading Room because one has to set aside a good 20 minutes for perusing the book-like menu (while sipping a superb Prierel rose champagne at £18 a whack). A set three course lunch is offered at £32.50, though the a la carte is more or less limitless. There's a separate drinks menu, nearly five pages of which is given over to exotic waters, each meticulously annotated: "interesting combination of high carbonate and low sodium" is a typical summation.

I just asked for fizzy and got San Pellegrino – which, though far from flat, still was not quite interesting enough to hold a proper conversation

Joseph Connolly treats the Birthday Girl to a wonderful meal his wallet will never forget



Joseph Connolly takes to Claridge's as to the manner born.

FACTFILE

- The Foyer and Reading Room, Claridge's, Brook Street, W1K 4HR
- Telephone 020-7629 8860
- Food: ★★★★★
- Service: ★★★★★
- Lunch, noon to 2.30pm, dinner, 6pm to 10.30pm. Also breakfast and tea.
- Cost: For the whole hog, as it were, between £50 and £100-ish per head, depending upon levels of booze and greed.

with. Our corner table had a cosy L-shaped banquette of chocolate velvet, its buttoned backboard reaching a couple of yards up the wall.

The son elected for creamed lobster bisque – the smoothest and most intense I have ever tasted – while I very happily fell upon a generous cake of chopped up white crab meat with slivers of cucumber and just the right amount of chive and lemon to spike the flavour while leaving the freshness of the crab to speak for itself.

Birthday Girl had warm and thick asparagus spears. "Where are they from?" I airily enquired. "Guess," said the waiter, French and inscrutable. "Peru," I offered, quite wildly. He nodded sagely as his eyebrows rose up in respect of my palate and perspicacity. "California," he said. Anyway, they came with a textbook-perfect Hollandaise – direct from Amsterdam, if I'm any judge.

The son wanted Claridge's steak parmesan – a huge sirloin, cooked medium as requested, topped by flakes of parmesan that melted on contact. More parmesan came in the form of crispy biscuity tubes, and then there were shallots and rocket, while the thick-cut chips were an object lesson in thick-cut chips.

Little Miss Twenty-One Today (whose son now, it occurs to me, is considerably older than she is) had the roast rump of lamb – lasciviously tender slices on the inevitable bed of I think pretty pointless lentils: she loved that, you could tell. The green beans attacked you – inexplicably fiery with garlic and chilli – but were quickly replaced with the rather more usual kind that don't bite back.

The wine I had chosen – a 2006 Crozes-Hermitage at £48 (silky, with

the usual vanilla nose that I rather love) would not, I knew, go at all well with what I decided I just had to have as my main – Omelette Arnold Bennett: the ultimate comfort food. The caress of creamy eggs, the chunks of smoked haddock and then the just-browned gorgeousness of that supreme Hollandaise... it was no penance at all to stick (for now) with the Pellegrino.

I am just wondering, you know, whether anyone will ever be moved to invent the Omelette Alan Bennett... maybe not – it would be made of added eggs, layered with disappointment and a silent despair, this left to curdle for years and then glazed, for the sake of appearances.

We thought we'd have a pause before pudding, and then we thought, oh, what the hell, let's just go for more food. The boy had a very fine caramelised pear and a highly unusual banana and passion fruit sorbet with almond financier (good, they've found some way of recycling the bastards).

The Child Bride and I could not resist cocktail bubbles with macaroons (we last caught their act live, in Las Vegas – didn't even know they were yet out of rehab), and sfound ourselves sharing a trio of little Martini glasses, each with a shudder of pastel froth: one a mango Daiquiri, one a Cosmopolitan and the other a very boozy something else, each accompanied by a very delicious Laduree-style soft macaroon in a matching colour: very deco, and very delightful.

The waiter thought that a glass of Corsican muscat would be perfect with our puds, and who was I to argue? He was right, of course – ideally sweet and raisiny. And Birthday Girl got an individual wedge of chocolate cake – rather like a sachertorte – with just the one candle on it (great heavens, she's getting younger by the minute).

Gosh, it was all sublime. And here's something odd: it was only when I stood up to leave that I realised how unfeasibly tall our waiter was. Now I know I'm... what am I? Never daunted, though – I looked him squarely in the navel and warmly shook him by the knee.

As we emerged into the dazzle of the hallway, I thought I'd like to stay forever. So wouldn't it be marvellous, actually, if I was that thing – a bent politician? Then I could live here permanently – claim it as a second home, and charge it all to you lot.

Gold, if I'm any judge

PATIENCE, please – it will be a while before you can find the medal-winners from this year's International Wine Challenge on the shelves of your favourite wine shop. But it should, I believe, be worth the wait.

Over the two weeks immediately after Easter, the great, the good, the acceptable and the poor were determined from close to 10,000 bottles from all over the wine world, spread out in carefully ordered rows in one of the Barbican exhibition halls.

Recognition of the very, very best wines – those deserving trophies in what is the biggest blind wine-tasting competition in the world – could be happening as you read this, for today is final judging day.

So I can't yet recommend individual wines, but if, later in the year, you buy a particularly delectable northern Italian white or a stunning Rhone syrah, both proudly displaying gold medal stickers, the chances are I might have helped give them that accolade.

Explaining the judging process (there are some 370 knowledgeable people involved, from wine-makers to wine writers, supermarket buyers to independent wine shop managers, wine educators to wine importers) would need much more space than is available here. But believe me that it is very fair, with no wine rejected out of hand and those making the medals category passing the lips of a number of different judges before a coveted gold award.

I've been a judge for well over a decade, and I've seen the challenge become better and better organised. The wines seem to have got better, too, though that may be a

matter of chance – judges don't have any say over which bottles are put before them.

Over the two days I spent at the Barbican this year, an astonishing variety of grapes and styles appeared on the table I shared with three other judges. Day one brought some real oddities: Czech and Austrian pinks, sweet rieslings from South Africa, and German reds made from freuburgunder, a grape even our Master of Wine chairman hadn't previously encountered – she Googled, to discover it was an early-ripening mutant of pinot noir.

Some were good, but better were six dark and perfumed montepulcianos from Abruzzo, three southern French red blends and a couple of heftier Argentine examples, a Barossa semillon and a verdeca from the toe of Italy's boot.

My second day saw the changeover point from the all-in round one (Spanish tempranillos good, South African sauvignons mostly forgettable) to the medal-worthy wines of round two. There will certainly be pleasures ahead for buyers of three wines we agreed were gold quality: a noisola and a passerina (two more rare grapes, white this time) from northern Italy and that Rhone red, a Crozes Hermitage which gloriously combined syrah's violet perfume and savoury intensity.

There were other delights too, from Germany, California and Australia.

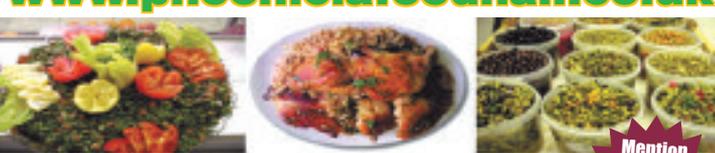
And we were only one judging group among the 20 at work, on one of the five days of round two...

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