

Joseph Connolly is thankful the meal at one of Gordon Ramsay's places didn't cost him a monkey

Do you want some chimps with that?

THE chimps' tea party – when, as a child, I was taken to the zoo, that for me was the main attraction. Most of the other animals I found to be either stinky and repellent, outright scary or else just plain ridiculous (in common, now I think of it, with how many people since?). But the chimps, they were great – dunking cups of tea over one another – presumably PG Tips – and tearing apart their currant buns (I have since heard a rumour that they were heavily sedated, or else it was the kiddies who would have ended up asunder).

I only mention this because of the zoo's proximity to York & Albany, the recent Gordon Ramsay set-up, a striking and singular building, Nash and cuboid, on a fairly hellish crossroads. The upper stuccoed floors provide bedrooms (for those whose dream it is to holiday in Parkway), while the nether parts are clad in the sort of large ceramic tiles that I associate with old Underground architecture, except that these have had all the oxblood leached out of them, leaving them wanly anaemic.

Picture, then, a small albino Tube station struggling to maintain its dignity while stranded on something akin to Staples Corner. And at the other end of the road, of course, is serious downtown Camden where you can get every manner of thing: a rude boy tifter, say – goth and punk T-shirts, skunk, knifed or deported.

This was actually my second attempt to penetrate the place. The first time, I had requested a table at one o'clock I was offered 2.30, or else downstairs "at any time at all". This made me look like a deeply unattractive, and so I declined. Later I gave them 10 days' notice, and managed to secure a table. A very small table, as it turned out, and wedged in quite absurdly close to those alongside. Rather curious little tables too – the Formica-like surface appearing to be composed of sections hewn from your old school pullover, these slices of knitting then sandwiched in aspic.

The room is plain – an ode to platinum and white – and rather disappointing after the bar which you walk through initially – also monochrome, but made rather elegant by deep and ornate cornicing, a very exciting-looking long and black and shiny bar (sporting six virgin Telegraphs in what surely has to be Guardian country), a stylish mantelpiece with dull gold finials and low deep-buttoned black leather sofas. In the evenings, this is where the well-heeled groovy Camdenites flock to, necking cocktails as if they really mean it.

I tried very hard to concentrate on the menu, but the conversations so close to either of my ears were proving a distraction. "You see, my problem is," said the bloke on the right to another bloke (looking fairly cheesed off) "my boy, right? He's read all the Harry Potters, and



Joseph Connolly takes a seat at the York & Albany bar.

FACTFILE

- **York & Albany**, 127-129 Parkway, NW1 7PS
- Telephone 020-7388 3344.
- Food ★★★★★
- Service ★★★★★
- Lunch, Mondays to Saturdays noon–3pm, dinner 6pm to 11pm, Sundays noon–9pm
- Set three course lunch costs £18, but more likely £75-£80 for two with wine.

now he won't read anything else."

On the other side, a youth with an incipient beard was telling his girlfriend how very wonderful she was. "Am I...?" she simpered. "Yes," he said. "Am I really...?" "Yes," he repeated. "Are you," asked my wife, "by any chance having the carmaroli white onion risotto with Swiss chard and parmesan?" "Oddly, I am," I said. "What are you going for?" "Now me," said the bloke, "I'm more of a John Grisham man myself. Don't read anything else." "Well," said my wife, "I thought this beetroot and chicory salad with ricotta and a cabernet sauvignon vinaigrette sounded rather nice." "Wonderful," sighed the youth. "Really?" went the giggly girl. "You really think I am...?" Then the waiter lobbed in his twopenceworth to the general hubbub and I thought I could be losing my mind.

Nice chap, the waiter – had worked with Ramsay at Claridge's and The Connaught. "Ah yes," I said, "that reminds me – is Angela cooking today?" I asked this because the great Angela Hartnett used to be chef at The Connaught before she set up this place for Ramsay, and though she has since opened a restaurant of her own, Murana, is still said to cook here.

He said he would check. The cheesed-off fellow next door was of the opinion that Jeffrey Archer, he's good, you want to try Jeffrey Archer, mate – while the kid told the skirt that

he'd never before met anyone like her. "Really...?" she gasped. "No," said the waiter. "Angela – she was here, but now she's gone off to Murana." Well it was 1.45pm by this time, so presumably she was cooking in neither place.

The beetroot thing was very good – like chunks of yielding bleeding heart, the sourness you remember from when you had to eat beetroot whether you liked it or not working well with the fluffiness of the ricotta.

My risotto was just superb, no two ways about it: at first I thought it salty, but the initial hit of it simmered down into deep and very pleasing onion intensity, the rice as creamy as you want it. My wife's main of braised belly of Wiltshire pork with polenta and spring onions looked just like a pudding, rather disconcertingly, the orange-topped cube of layered pork and fat seeming like a tiramisu, the polenta a goodly ladleful of Bird's. More fat than pork here, though, and not much enjoyed.

I had roast breast of corn-fed guinea fowl with a minced up confit of the leg rather cutely stuffed into a pair of tiny canneloni, all this on a tousel of braised and blackish lettuce. The breast was excellent – tender, which guinea fowl needn't be, and a proper traditional roasted flavour. The confit, though, tasted only of garlic – and so also, from that moment on, did the decent bottle of reasonably priced (£16.50) Montepulciano.

The book lover, his cheesed-off chum and Romeo and bleeding Juliet had all pushed off by this time, only to be replaced on the one side by three Birds of Paradise weeping over Louboutins, and on the other by a dedicatedly "retired" couple who went to restaurants in order to talk about other ones (Galvin's, largely, which was deemed rather nicer because there, at least, they had tablecloths).

My wife's foamed ginger brulee with pear and cassis sorbet

she pronounced the out-and-out highlight of the meal: simply perfect, is what she said. And just to the left of it, there lay a strange little granular blob of something bright yellow. She tasted the tiniest morsel, and I did likewise. We stared at one another briefly before surprise matured quite rapidly into utter revulsion. What could this thing be...?

Beyond the grittiness I had most assuredly detected a top note of Domestos, but there was something more... and then I had it, yes, of course: mothballs, what else? And also... not Domestos, no, much too strong... but the subtlest undercurrent of Toilet Duck? The waiter, he had no idea what it was, and scurried off to ask. The verdict? Ginger and honey. Pickled. Well.

Then on the way to the loo I discovered why you must never, ever accept the offer of lunch downstairs "at any time at all". What we have here is something of the night, a dream bordello, deep red and pulsating like an engorged thrombosis – entirely empty, predictably: no trace even of turquoise-lidded floosies, flaunting their layered suggestions.

And when I returned to the table... there was a wooden oval Shaker box, and inside, swaddled in a napkin, four warm madeleines...! And I was thinking, hey listen, if you're quick, you could just squeeze in an authentically Proustian moment. And then, oh – the bill arrived and, I don't know... somehow the time was lost.

It's OK in here, in rather a colourless sort of way: it's big on noise, but it lacks animation. They might consider importing a table-load of chimps – what with the noise, madeleines and pots of tisané, they'd have a field day. And sometimes you need a cheeky monkey.

□ Joseph Connolly's latest novel is *Jack the Lad and Bloody Mary*, Faber and Faber, £8.99.

Ramsay booked

GORDON Ramsay may have been caught by the tabloids pre-bagging up to half of the "freshly prepared" food in his gastropubs, but it hasn't stopped him co-authoring a £20 tome on Great British Pub Food. (Harper Collins)

That coq au vin you paid a mint for was made elsewhere and reheated in a bag but according to the jacket Ramsay believes "all too often pub owners think they can get away with serving tasteless defrosted meals."

He adds: "To my mind many gastropubs sell mediocre food at restaurant prices," which is funny because that's pretty much what the Ham&High's restaurant critic Victoria Prever said about Ramsay's

The Warrington in Maida Vale. (See also Joseph Connolly on this page.)

Anyway, the book is beautifully photographed and contains good solid recipes for every great British dish from scotch eggs and potted crab to devilled kidneys and Welsh rabbit.

London Particular, which gave rise to the name of the capital's notorious fogs, the pea soupers is a thick broth of smoked ham hock, veg and dried split green peas. Inevitably there is also fish chips and mushy peas, crab cakes and lemon sole as well as beef cobbler, steak and kidney pie, Lancashire hotpot and toad in the hole.

Treacle tart and sherry trifle round off the puddings.

Open for business

THE five star Landmark Hotel Marylebone has opened a new restaurant and bar Twotwentytwo this week.

A million pound refurb has attractively twinned the original oak panelling, fireplaces and sculptured ceiling with butcher-block-style tables, glossy leather banquettes, polished mirrors and chandeliers.

Naturally those pewter topped tables have a champagne bowl inset for those must-have-a-Moet moments.

The bibulous connoisseur can also browse the "wine

library" which runs down one side of the bar, or order a well constructed cocktail.

Beef carpaccio with rocket, black truffle oil and parmesan, tart of wild mushrooms and goat's cheese or seabass with fennel, watercress and orange salad give a flavour of the modern European menu from executive chef Gary Klaner.

Open only Mondays to Fridays 11.30am-11pm, Twotwentytwo is clearly aimed at the business end of the market but should be a glamorous treat for a mid-week celebratory meal.

Italian casual chic

AROUND the corner, the former Giusto in Blandford Street, Marylebone has been made over and relaunched as IL Baretto, an Italian wine bar and restaurant from the same stable as Zuma, Roka and La Petite Maison.

It is pitching itself as chic but casual and will feature an all-Italian wine list and

regional cuisine cooked on the robata grill or in the wood-fired oven.

Expect authentic pizzas and pastas from head chef Marzio Zacchi as well as the likes of deep-fried squid and zucchini with spicy tomato dip.

Prices range from £4.50 for snacks to £25 for the most expensive mains.



PHOENICIA
MEDITERRANEAN FOOD HALL
186-192 Kentish Town Road, London NW5 2AE

Phone: 020 7267 1267
www.phoeniciafoodhall.co.uk





Looking for a special ingredient?
Then try us first at Phoenicia

We are specialised in imported, exotic ingredients from the Mediterranean and the rest of the world.

- Fresh Meat Counter • Fresh Fruit & Vegetables • Organic Food Section
- Coffee Bar • Home Made Cakes • Fresh Sandwiches • Catering Service
- Business Contracts • Specialised Section of Pasta and Olive Oil • Local Delivery.

We are open 7 days a week
Mon to Sat 9.00am till 8.00pm, Sunday 10.00am till 4.00pm

Named one of the top 20 deli's in London
You will be surprised by the variety of stock we carry!





Mention this advert to receive a special treat