

# The one with the old banger

**Joseph Connolly** goes in search of a sausage with no clothes

**H**OMES. You know Homes – the glossy porn pullout in your Ham&High, where a welter of strutting and pottingly gorgeous hussies – sorry, houses – weekly make us hot with lust before we cool and sigh at the stark and crushing admission that these high maintenance babes, oh – they are just so way out of our league.

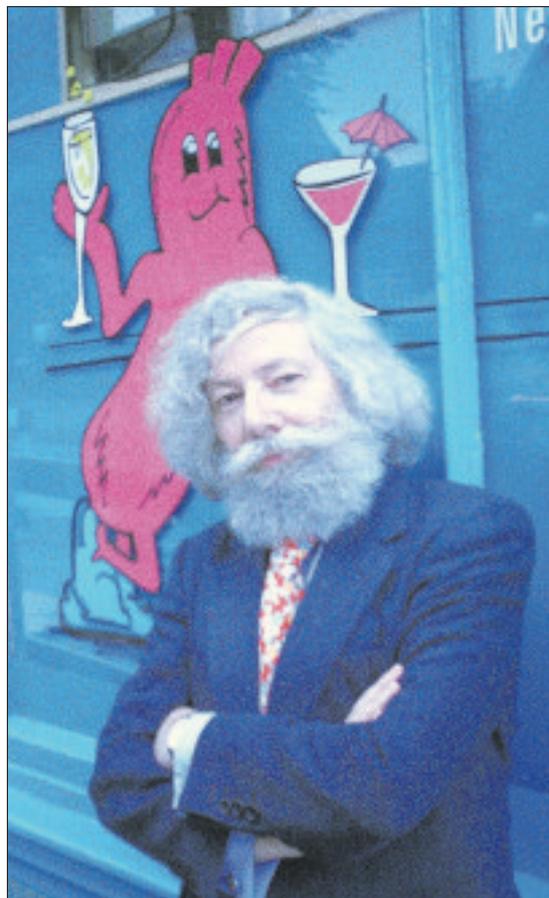
Well in one quite recent edition I spotted a particularly hardcore example: tall and amply endowed Georgiana, warm pink, jutting cills, flashing 12-pane windows to the soul, and gauzy wistaria, just barely there. The price would numb your mind and make you weep... but still, by the dizzying standards of Hampstead, it didn't seem that bad: not too many millions.

What, of course, the photo pointedly failed to demonstrate is that whenever the proud owners of said wondrous pile might care to glance through those 18th century glazing bars, what is always there to punch them in the face is the hulk of the Royal Free Hospital. And that's the trouble with Pond Street – this jarring and stained titanic car park dropped down upon us from Mars, it looms over everything like a constant and lowering miasma that you know will just never disperse.

So (and here's my point – Lord knows there had to be one) if you're going to open a fab and wacky eatery slap bang opposite, then you might as well paint it the brightest kingfisher blue, further plaster it with a cheeky neon pink cartoon and name it The Naked Sausage: what's to lose? This strip, it needs all the fun it can get: the Sausage (billed as a New York diner, bar and nightclub) is flanked on the one side by a funeral director – looking pretty dead, it must be said, though not to the degree of the estate agent to the left of it: that was truly in mourning.

To publicise their opening a couple of months ago, the proprietors had shipped over a genuine NYPD squad car, but it isn't there now. Nor, inside, was a Manhattan vibe immediately apparent: blond wood floors, a little bar with Perspex stools in the signature kingfisher blue and down a few steps just three or four tables with the blue picked up again in sub-Jacobson butterfly chairs.

It's all a bit spare and clunky, though it would be unfair to say that it resembles a drop-in day care centre. The Stateside aspect seems to rest solely in the black-and-white pictures of all the usual suspects: Elvis, Marilyn, Audrey (as Holly Golightly, natch), McQueen, Sinatra, Dean – none



of whom, I don't think, actually was a New Yorker, but let it lie – and on the silvery hologram-topped tables a little chrome napkin dispenser, the yellow squeazy bottle of French's mustard, Heinz ketchup (and also Heinz mayonnaise, when it really ought to be Hellmann's) and one of those tall glass canisters brimming with coloured straws that tend to shoot out and tumble just everywhere when you lift up the lid (or maybe that was just me).

I was there to have lunch with this newspaper's Numero Uno, whom I shall christen Ed, in accordance with his calling. He arrived a few minutes late – said he was caught up on the pavement outside due to not just the road being dug up but also because a coffin was being carefully manoeuvred through the chaos.

The proprietors of The Naked Sausage do seem to have quite a few cards stacked up against them, don't they? So can they overcome? Well, yes indeed, I am relieved to say (because the last thing they needed was a lousy review).

There's a largish garden at the back – basically attractive, but under-established: summer and much busy lizzy would jolly it up. There's a scattering of huge terracotta Ali Baba pots – they seemed to have nothing in them (not a sausage), though who can

tell? They might easily be concealing 40 politicians. Anyway, into the garden – that's where Ed and I wandered. Now Ed, I have to tell you, doesn't eat meat, doesn't eat fish and doesn't drink alcohol. OK – I'm lying about the alcohol, but the rest is bang-on. So he can't so much peruse a menu as seek out the (usually one and only) veggie option – in this case a burger made from quinoa. Made from, um...? Well, according to the menu it is "the Mother of all Grains from the mountains of Peru and Bolivia". A multi-talented little plant, actually, whose seeds are used as rice, while the leaves pay lip service to spinach (you want foodie info? You now know where to come).

The burger – there was also carrot, lentils and sweet chilli in it – didn't quite cohere, but the taste of it rather grew on Ed, and he finished the lot. The accompanying chips were excellent – you knew that just by looking at them.

Although there are proper 100 per cent ground beef burgers, I felt I owed it to all concerned to amble down the sausage route. It's a short and to-the-point menu, although in the evenings only (why?) they have chargrilled chicken and steak, which is, the menu underlines, "hand-cut" (as opposed to the sort which is cloven by an axe strapped on to

## FACTFILE

- **The Naked Sausage**, 7-9 Pond Street NW3.
- Telephone: 020-7317 7105.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆ (compared with similar set-ups)
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆ (Please note the new scoring system.)
- Open every day from breakfast onwards.
- 70s Disco Fever, 7pm to midnight, Fridays and Saturdays.
- Cost: £30 or so, with drink, more in the evenings.

your ankle). So which of the bangers to go for...? There's Park Avenue (which is, um – Cumberland), Brooklyn Bridge (hot and spicy), Little Italy (garlic, red wine) and the Times Square New York Sausage. Which is...?

"Pork," said the waitress. Yes... but why New York? "It's a name". Right-ho. I went for Park Avenue, and I must say it was very good indeed. Three plump sausages with crispy skins and fine meat flavour on a cloud of fluffy mash and moated by dark and glossy gravy with caramelised onions: very much enjoyed. All the sausages they make themselves in the East End, and they sell them on the premises too.

We didn't trouble with starters – they change each day, but all that was on offer were onion rings or – the most bizarre starter I have ever encountered – three chicken drumsticks: law unto itself, this place. Ed drank chardonnay, I drank merlot – not at all bad, and only £4 for a glass that took a third of a bottle. There is beer (Bud, Beck's, Stella) at £2.80 a bottle – or, if you prefer, those two old New York favourites, John Smith's bitter and Bulmer's cider.

Our bill, including four glasses of wine and two puddings was £38.30: excellent value. Oh God, yes – that pudding. Oh yum. Home-made brownies – warm and yielding, with not just a chocolate sauce but molten toffee, vanilla ice cream and one fresh strawberry: worth a visit on its own. And then they dole out buckshee jelly beans.

You won't believe it but on our way out we got entangled with not just the road works but this hearse and a brand new coffin. It's just as well that the NYPD squad car wasn't there too to further jam up the works. And that reminded me, so I nipped back inside.

"Where's the NYPD squad car gone?" I was eager to know. Answer: "Chingford."

So there you have it: The Naked Sausage: crazy name, crazy place! Bye!

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

# Generous in more than just flavour

**T**HE generosity of the wine trade continues to delight me... Some quick arithmetic on the way home from Berry Bros & Rudd's May press tasting revealed that the 43 wines I'd sampled would have cost more than £3,000 to buy, had Vicky, Emily and their charming colleagues not opened bottles for the privileged invitees.

Add in the 20 more I didn't have time to taste, and the total retail price topped £4,000. OK, the cost to Berry's wasn't quite that, and it must be tax deductible, but even so... Certainly, press tastings have a commercial purpose – even such wine establishment names as Berry's need continuing media exposure of their wines – but to offer three separate examples of Spain's most iconic wines is generous indeed.

But please don't stop reading now for fear that what follows will be way beyond your budget. Some prices will make your eyes water, but Berry's, for all the plushness of its St James's Street base, isn't a seller of posh wines alone.

There was a revealing portrait of Britain's oldest wine merchant – it's been in those premises for more than 300 years – broadcast on BBC4 in February in Wine: The Firm. Sadly, the show's Hampstead-based production company Oxford Film & Television can't supply a DVD if you missed it, but it made clear that Berry's is far from stuffy: the sense of humour, even at the top, made understanding the complexities of buying and selling top bordeaux and burgundy much easier to understand.

At St James's Street, the staff may wear suits, but computers are built into the antique desks, the shop is wheelchair-friendly and those enjoying tastings or seminars in the evocative brick-floored cellars are assured that the plumbing is certainly 21st century.

And the wines are enormously varied – one

customer may be ordering cases of pricey en-primeur bordeaux, another dropping in for an £8 bottle to go with that evening's supper.

But what did I taste which helped run up that staggering bill? Last on the list was Spain's highest-priced wine, L'Ermita from Alvaro Palacios, one of the growers who put Priorat on the fine wine plateau.

The 2006 (£415) is showing the beginnings of the extraordinary complexity and style of this wine from high on the slate slopes beside the abandoned priory from which it takes its name.

A little before that came two examples of another Spanish icon, Vega Sicilia Unico (£163.50, £175.25), from Ribera del Duero, showing wonderful integration and much more delicacy than I expected.

But in between – and in no way intimidated, with delightful fresh perfumed fruit and clarity of flavours – was 2007 Vendemia Crianza (£9.25) from another branch of the Palacios empire, in Rioja.

Similarly, at the beginning, the lie-up of champagnes included three variants on the Jacquesson d'orgue tardif 2008 theme (£274 to £440.40 in magnum). You're probably suffering superlative overkill, but they were wonderful – complex scents and food-friendliness. If anyone is listing, my preference is the lingeringly lovely Avize Grand Cru (£313).

Posh can come cheaper, as the 1998 Maily Les Echansons (£49) proved – rich, complex, hugely long.

Again, however, there's an under-£10 wine which represents stunning value: Berry's Extra Dry Cremant de Limoux (£8.75) seriously champagne-like in scent, soft creamy bubbles, elegant fruit. It comes from one of the most maverick of southern France's growers, Jean Louis Denois, independence personified.

You won't find wines like that on multiple retailers' shelves...



LIZ SAGUES