

CLOSE your eyes. Now form a mental picture of Hampstead High Street. All very difficult when you're trying to read, I do realise that, but here is what I'm driving at: how many shops can you put a name to?

Yes, but now try it without the chain stores: no Waterstone's, McDonalds, Starbucks, phone shops or rag trade. Is there anything left?

No, not really – except, of course, The Coffee Cup – since 1954 a symbol of stability in a horribly shifting world – a beacon of welcome from the good old days.

This means just when exactly? Fair point. Indeed, one of the most bewildering aspects of the current state of global uncertainty is that in no time at all this time too will be remembered as the good old days.

The era I am really harking back to, however, is when The Coffee Cup was flanked by the greengrocer Sam Cook and then Forster – a sort of tiny Fortnum & Mason where small and dedicated ladies in white coats would slice great truckles of cheddar with a wire, carve a York ham and sell you lobster bisque or a Bertorelli bombe surprise.

It was when the High Street boasted a car showroom, a timber merchant, Maynards the sweetshop, Fowler the ironmonger, Bewlay the tobacconist, Gaze the haberdashery, Stamp the chemist, Knowles-Brown the jeweller and the one and only chain store, Woolworth's (with dark and creaking floorboards and every single damn thing you could think of for just pennies and shillings).

And when chaps in duffel coats and desert boots and girls with twin sets and pony tails would buy their orange Penguins in the High Hill Bookshop and then huddle around the gas fire in their bedsits and play LPs.

Cheap and generous

Musing on the nature of nostalgia, novelist **Joseph Connolly** takes a trip down memory lane to his favourite Hampstead eatery, The Coffee Cup, and finds it every bit as good as it was in the old days

I gazed upon all of this through the wide and envious eyes of a schoolboy much too young to be allowed so much as a sniff of all the exciting goings-on – ownership, say, of a Spanish guitar and matching bullfight poster, the panache of Chianti, and then to jam a candle into the neck of the flask!

But more than any of that, I yearned to sit under the red-and-white striped canopy of The Coffee Cup and sip with nonchalance a cappuccino from a shallow Pyrex cup. I had never heard the word "sophistication" (or "nonchalance" for that matter) but, by God, I was sure that here was it.

And when I saw Tony Hancock's film *The Rebel*, I was as shocked as everyone around him when in a trendy coffee bar, sitting next to a Swiss cheese plant, he demanded his coffee without froth.

"No froth?!" remonstrated the outraged proprietor. "Do you know what it cost me to have this machine installed?"

Ah yes, the machine – the Gaggia, that single most potent emblem of the place to be seen in. Out with the tea shops with their doilies, iced fancies and one for the pot. In with the continental coffee bar – beat poetry, untipped Gauloises and contemporary furniture with brass ferrules.

I am pleased to say that the Gaggia is still in rude health – snoring and gurgling, always capable of a sudden whooshing that can make you leap.

Still there too (but of course) is the comforting oak panelling, that



Novelist Joseph Connolly at The Coffee Cup.

Picture by Charles Connolly

saggy central beam holding up a pot bellied ceiling (now, alas, stark white and not the nicotine of old) and still the burgundy Rexine banquettes, the velvet covered milking stools.

I was there with my son, who goes there much more than I do, these days. By coincidence, a friend of his lives directly over the pot-bellied ceiling and was unamused when the contractors who recently were installing the cafe's new curved awning managed to shatter his window. Not that you really can tell it's a new awning. It's the same shape, just lacking the cut-out Gothic lettering on the lowest slat. There is now a huge and square red umbrella on the pavement proudly proclaiming the name of the place in the same quaint typeface.

Sitting outside is an attractive option, particularly on the rustic bench directly beneath the canopy. But there's nothing so cosy as inside, the panelling made warm by the bedroom wall lights with

their pleated and tasseled shades.

The menu – still tall and skinny like a 1960s 'humorous' birthday card – is quite enormous in its scope. There are 18 breakfast possibilities – including eggs Benedict and, very fondly, kippers on toast – all of them under £6. There are 10 mains for lunch or dinner and even the priciest of those – steak or veal – is just £9.90. Then there are freshly made pastas, a daily list of specials, sandwiches, salads, toasts, cakes, puddings, ice creams... God, you won't starve here.

The lad and I were there for lunch. He seemed to know just about everybody, from the extraordinarily polite and happy staff to a woman sitting outside who turned out to be the landlady of a pub in Belsize.

At the next table, there was a teenage American egotist, laboriously drawing to an older lady who could be a counsellor or a mentor or maybe just into merciless self-flagellation about

how he sure did miss the girl who had upped and left him lonely. "Maybe it's just a blip," suggested his very saintly friend. The boy then shrugged with all the weariness of a sage who had profited from several lifetimes. "You think...? Uh... what's a blip?"

Elsewhere, there were regulars with their regular Ham&High and meal close to hand (often scrambled eggs on toast). All ages seem to love it here – there's even a children's menu.

I decided on a ham omelette with chips, while my son went for a special – veal in a lemon sauce with saute potatoes and spinach. The omelette was large and properly fluffy – the reason why in Paris you often can't resist one – and the chips were real and golden with a pretty good crunch. They might run to a black pepper grinder, though, as opposed to a white pepper shaker.

"How's the veal?" "It's... good," the boy replied. "Tender. Very lemony..." "Well that would be the lemon sauce, of course..." "Mmm," he agreed. "I don't actually very much like things cooked in lemon, you know?"

"I see..." (look – I'm used to all this). "So why in fact did you, um...?" "Well quite," he readily concurred. "I was only just asking myself the very same thing."

I meanwhile happily forked down the frites – so eagerly, in fact, that I missed my face entirely

and, oh God, they were just everywhere. I felt suddenly in need of the young American's erstwhile squeeze because he had just been droning on endlessly about how she had always been there for him when the chips were down.

I had a cappuccino, which would horrify Italians and purists, this being the afternoon. And yes, the froth was lovely, thank you.

This place achieves the impossible – good, cheap and generous meals in a charming space in the heart of Hampstead village. And one day, you know, our budding transatlantic philosopher will think of this only as the good old days – The Coffee Cup will be remembered with love, long after the blip is entirely forgotten.

□ *Joseph Connolly's latest novel is Jack The Lad And Bloody Mary, published by Faber and Faber at £8.99. www.josephconnolly.co.uk.*

FACTFILE

- **THE COFFEE CUP**
- 74 Hampstead High Street, NW3 1QX
- Telephone: 020-7435 7565
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★★★★☆☆
- Cost: About £25 for two courses for two, without wine

Italy's answer to bubbly

EACH time I sip a glass of prosecco, it brings back happy memories of visits to Venice – out of the main tourist season and off the day-trippers' regular tracks when it's still a magical place. But even if you can't share the memories, you can appreciate the wine.

Not that long ago, prosecco was an unfamiliar and rarely respected fizz; how that has changed. In some smart bars, it's outselling champagne – and that's not just because of the credit crunch.

Increasingly, knowledgeable imbibers recognise that it has its own special charms. Like any fizz, there's bad, better and wonderful. The rules are currently changing, reducing yields for all prosecco to improve the quality and banning the use of the name outside the delimited area.

And the best – Prosecco di Conegliano e Valdobbiadene – will, from this year's vintage, be able to put on its label the distinguished letters DOCG, which indicate the highest qualification of Italian wine. Inevitably, production will drop and prices will rise across the board, so enjoy now!

Unlike many champagne-challengers, prosecco is made differently. The carefully-controlled second fermentation, which gives all good fizz its bubbles, is done in tanks. But if you visit the cellar of any good producer you'll understand that the care and skill of this low-temperature fermentation preserves the delicacy of flavour which characterises the prosecco grape and results in wine which can be just as fine as champagne.

Its first-ever UK public relations campaign, aiming to educate consumers and trade about a wine which isn't yet fully understood here. I'll raise a glass to its success. In the meantime, here's a tempting chance for Ham&High readers to join me.

□ One of the best-respected names in the enchantingly vine-clad hills to the north of Venice is Bisol, whose wines are imported to the UK by Primrose Hill-based Bibendum. It has been Bibendum's fastest-growing name over the past five years and sales are currently "on fire", says Bisol's export manager Roberto Cremonese.

Though the company manages 120 hectares of picturesque vineyards, including three on the 'cru' hill of Cartizze, where land is valued at close to €1million per hectare – it remains a family business, run by Antonio and Eliseo Bisol and their four sons.

And they have grand ambitions. "We work with great passion in order that, in 30 years, Conegliano will have the same prestige as

Reims and Valdobbiadene the same charm as Epernay," says Gianluca, one of their sons. Bisol is currently replanting an ancient vineyard on the island of Mazzorbo in the Venetian Lagoon – but that won't be prosecco. The grape variety is dorona, historically Venetian, and the resulting limited-edition wine will be a still white.

Bisol is offering two magnums of prosecco – one of the vintage Crede (RRP £30) and another of Jeio, named after the grandfather of the family (RRP £20), to Ham & High readers.

For a chance to win, answer the following question: Which Italian city is south of Bisol's vineyards?

The Crede goes to the reader submitting the first correct answer drawn from those received by the closing date of July 1; the Jeio to the runner-up. To enter, email your answer and daytime number to Chance2Win@hamhigh.co.uk. Over-18s only.

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HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

□ Here's a tip for DIY enthusiasts painting this weekend. When painting with emulsion, if you want to take a break, instead of washing out your brush or roller, load it with paint and seal it in a plastic bag, this will prevent it drying out. Saves time and materials.

www.urbansolutions.co.uk 020-7435 1111

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09 LONDON restaurant guide

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