

**B**AKER Street – not really a destination, is it? More a street to idly regard from a bus or taxi, noting that the Persian rug shop is now well into its 19th year of closing down.

I only ever go there now if I need to consult the Great Detective on some or other pressing concern, which if left unresolved would surely lead to the gravest consequences for the security of the nation.

One of Inspector Lestrade's thick constables is stationed permanently outside what they now are trying to pass off upon the unwitting as a "museum" at number 221b.

It's a far cry from the old days when, while awaiting the return of Mr Sherlock Holmes and his good friend and colleague Dr Watson, his landlady Mrs Hudson could be relied upon for a fine strong cup of tea and a toasted muffin, together with the encouragement to load one's calabash with a singular Balkan blend from the Turkish slipper upon the awl, while contemplating in mawe a mezzotint of the Reichenbach Falls.

More of an attraction these days is the clutch of rock shops – a series of murky little hovels specialising in 1950s and 1960s music nostalgia, with a bit of punk and Britpop thrown in, to demonstrate that dreadfulness has long since ceased to be a barrier to immortality.

One shop is called It's Only Rock And Roll – and I don't like it. They sell T-shirts bearing The Who's target roundel and old 45s sprayed gold, bunged in a frame and offered at £175 a throw.

Opposite, there's The Beatles Store, run by a chirpy old fella in a Beatle wig and, right next to that, sits Elvisly Yours, run by a stolid old fella in an Elvis wig.

I tried to redress the balance by loitering with no intent whatever in my customary Verdi full fig, which failed to get me mobbed – Lestrade's policeman not hastily

# It's the chef whodunit

Tracking down a place to eat in Sherlock Holmes' manor, Baker Street, novelist Joseph Connolly follows his nose to Canteen. But while he's served up a treat, something terrible has happened to his wife's chicken ...

summoned to restore some sort of order.

Recently, however, Baker Street has become something of a foodie haven.

There's Royal China and the Jewish restaurant Reubens – right next to the Arthur Murray School of Dance, although I can't really explain why I find this amusing – as well as Galvin.

Right opposite this is Canteen, one of three in London (the others in Spitalfields and the Royal Festival Hall), a huge and glass-clad corner site that looks like, well like a canteen, actually – a loving and stylish recreation of a 1950s original, which never existed.

Well maybe in Manhattan, but never here – what, multi-coloured Perspex pendants and lit-up bands of bright tinted glass?

No, not here. We had pale blue and primrose pegboard, Fablon and a big dead plant.

The food, however, that's something else – British to the core. There's even a mission statement: "Honest food, nationally sourced, skilfully prepared and reasonably priced."

The honest food bit puzzled me a tad. What can this mean?

I've never had a sausage lie to me yet – never was knowingly inveigled by the duplicity of Bubble nor Squeak.

Both are on the menu, alongside every manner of Blighty favourites such as pie of the day, roast of the day, any combination at all of breakfasty things (served all day and, I suspect, the most popular choice of all) and amusing little quirks like Marmite on toast and, um, fish finger sandwich.



**A murder mystery ... novelist Joseph Connolly of the scene of the crime, Canteen.**

There's HP sauce and Heinz ketchup on the table and the puddings are all treacle tart, Banoffee pie, Eton Mess – you get the idea.

Right, then, grub time.

My wife and I were all for the pie of the day – what is it?

The polite and happy waitress said there were two. Two! Our cups runneth over. Tell us, tell us! Curried chicken, and broccoli and cheese. Our cups were dashed from our lips – didn't fancy those at all. So roasts, then. I had pork, she had chicken.

And meanwhile, booze. There is a good thick drinks list bound in sturdy red hide, no doubt off the back of an honest, nationally sourced, skilfully prepared and reasonably priced cow.

There were loads of real ales with sniggery names (Dorothy Goodbody sounded as if she could deliver) and a long list of cocktails including a new one on me – the Twinkle (champagne, vodka and elderflower).

I thought I'd confine my twinkling to a glass of Prosecco (£4.50 and excellent – all the wines, apart from Chapel Down, are from a place called Abroad).

My wife went for a lager, Union, very dark – British although more Viennese in style – and much enjoyed. It was caramelly and biscuity, apparently quite a snack in itself.

My roast pork was a revelation – farmed in Cumbria by the eighth generation of pig farmers, who by now seem to know what they're doing.

Sensationally buttery and tender and almost indecently luscious, just as roast pork should be. No dryness, though not at all fatty. This came with proper roast potatoes, crunchy cabbage and, of course, apple sauce.

It was Sunday lunch on a weekday – perfect and made even better by a glass of Valpolicella.

So, how was the chicken? Oh dear. It looked the part, all right – large leg and thigh, suitably

golden – but cutting into it was something else.

It was rubbery, unyielding and soon the struggle was abandoned by a downcast woman who confined herself to the accompanying so-so chips. So I won.

There was a party of 12 at the next table, fresh from the office – 10 girls and two young men in the ill-fitting suits which people who have to wear suits wear.

They both shouted in order to impress the gaggle, maybe not seeing that it needn't be louder, just funnier.

One of the boys then said: "Can I get the tab?" Twelve credit cards appeared and the maths involved was prodigious – 30 minutes for the meal, 40 more to settle the bill.

So the wife deserves a pudding, don't you think?

Rhubarb compote with strawberries was the choice and I went for blackcurrant jelly with home-made ice cream and shortbread.

This was great, and how often do you see jelly on a menu? Dark and fruity, first-class vanilla ice cream.

So, how was the rhubarb? Oh dear. Gingery, rather sour and soupy, I'm afraid, eaten with less than gusto. So I won.

We passed on coffee and many teas, including PG Tips – bliss.

I mentioned to the waitress, as she wordlessly removed the hardly-touched chicken, that it had

been impenetrable and she said she was sorry and would tell chef.

Chef, clearly, didn't give a damn in blue blazes because it still appeared on the bill.

But that apart, I think this is a very good place indeed. You can go for a blowout or else be out for under a tenner. Its evident popularity is deserved.

And then I saw it. Next to each table is an urgent notice: "Free Wifi." Good God, I didn't even know she was in jail! I would have sprinted back up the road to place this shameful case of wrongful imprisonment into the hands of Holmes ... but he doesn't exist.

All that guff at the beginning? Fiction, I am less to be trusted than Bubble and Squeak.

□ Joseph Connolly's latest novel is *Jack The Lad and Bloody Mary*, published by Faber and Faber, at £8.99. [www.josephconnolly.co.uk](http://www.josephconnolly.co.uk).

## FACTFILE

### □ CANTEEN

- 55 Baker Street
- Tel: 0845 686 1122
- Opening times: Monday to Friday, 8am-11pm, Saturday to Sunday, 9am-11pm
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Cost: £20 for two for a bite, £50ish for two courses and a couple of drinks

## A natural when it comes to wine

**A**S GREEN initiatives grow, more wine from far afield is being shipped in bulk containers – for a much smaller carbon footprint per litre – and bottled close to where it will be sold. But what of the final result?

I've rarely read a more depressing comment than in the trade magazine *Off Licence News* recently. Describing how customised own-label wines were created from the Californian tankfuls she imported, a marketer said: "We can adjust sugar levels and almost tailor-make the stuff."

That "stuff" must be pretty unnatural wine after such a treatment – and quite the opposite of what Plamen Georgiev offers at his shop in Archway Road, Highgate. Carrying its familiar Wine of Course nameplate but soon to change to Zelas (Thracian for wine), the emphasis is on "natural wine".

This is not as obvious a description of wine as you might imagine since often a whole lot of manipulation of grapes and juice goes on – way beyond what the innocent drinker understands – even if bottling is in the cellar of origin.

From a single shelf, the shop's offerings from France, Italy, Spain, Chile and New Zealand have grown to fill half a wall and there will be more soon from Slovenia.

Whether the [www.zelas.co.uk](http://www.zelas.co.uk) website claim of "the most extensive selection of organic and natural wines in the whole of the UK" can be justified is probably doubtful. But it's certainly one of the largest choices you'll find in a single location locally.

Natural wine goes further than simply organic or biodynamic growing and the use of wild rather than cultured yeasts for fermentation.

It also extends to the cellar side of things. Minimal intervention is the aim and, apart from a little sulphur (without that, wine is usually too fragile to survive travel and time), the available additive package is shunned.

This style of wine-making doesn't come cheap, however, so most bottle prices are in double figures.

But there is a lower-priced alternative, which is also in line with Georgiev's green argument that no wines costing below £10 should be packed in new glass bottles.

Bring your own empties – or ask him for one – and fill them direct from the barrel.

Although the barrels look the part, they're purely there for visual effect. Inside, modern packaging technology (something pretty common now in the wine world but I won't give away the secret) allows tasting samples or bottlefuls to be drawn off without exposing what remains to any risk of oxidation or other damage. It means he can sell wines for £9.50 which, in bottle, would cost about £13 to £14.

There is a Cheverny from the Loire, where sauvignon blanc is softened with menu pineau

(a grape, also known as arbois, rarely seen beyond that limited region). A 2006 vintage, the maturity gives an intriguingly honeyed yet still fresh edge.

The red is a 2006 grenache/syrah blend from Provence, courtesy of Henri Milan whose wines are winning increasing respect (buy other cuvees in bottle and prices reach £37). It's fresh yet serious, a very attractive summer drink.

If you insist on buying bottles, there are substantial discounts through the Zelas Natural Wine Club (see the website).

But in the two months since the fill-your-own initiative was introduced it has proved increasingly popular and a wider choice of wines is planned.

Georgiev says: "There are so many things you can do for the environment – but lots of people are doing nothing."

So take the opportunity and refill your empty bottles with environmentally-friendly wines.

LIZ SAGUES

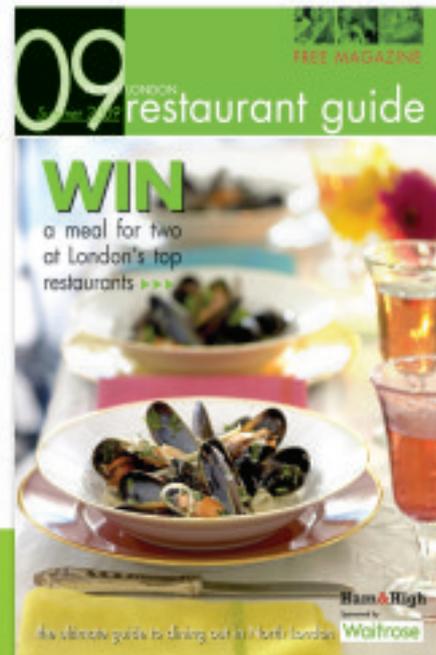


**HOME TIP OF THE WEEK**

□ When doing any DIY repairs, the best way to avoid wasting valuable time and materials is to double check your measurements before cutting. Once the timber is cut, if it's too short, then you'll have to start again. As the phrase goes: "Measure twice, cut once."

[www.urbansolutions.co.uk](http://www.urbansolutions.co.uk) 020-7435 1111

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