

A restaurant to bring you out of your shell

HERE used to be a shag called Parson's Pleasure. Pipe tobacco, you know. I only mention it because I have been straining to think of any British establishment or product bold enough to directly confront head-on this whole very sticky business of 'pleasure', and it's all I can come up with. For the French, of course, the pursuit of pleasure in all its rosy and various forms has always been the *raison d'être, non?* And Mon Plaisir has been proudly flying its voluminous tricolor in Monmouth Street for well over 50 years, while this hungry nation of shopkeepers of ours has all that time remained eager to succumb to its *grenouille* charms, to be seduced by its fragrance and garlicky blandishments, to be a shy little *escargot*, so keen to be coaxed from its shell: we surrender weakly, lie back, and try not to think of England.

Quite hard actually to forget old Blighty, though, if you've got a table by the window, because the Covent Garden Hotel bang opposite rather wittily and provocatively flies an equally enormous Union Jack. Stand on the pleasingly cobbled narrow road between the two and you feel like a putative quisling on the field of Waterloo. The website is very eager to play up the Gallic angle to the hilt: "The entente cordial [sic] is as thick as the waiters". Oh no, hang on... "is as thick as the waiters [sic] French accents". Okay – glad we got that right. There was a gag about a French restaurant when they were a rarity here, but it's far too politically incorrect to repeat. Oh well okay, then: wife says "Are frogs' legs on the menu?". Husband goes "I hope not – else how are they going to bring us the bloody food?". *Mon Dieu*.

I've enjoyed many good meals here, down all the years, though even so I was slightly put off by another of the website's statements: "A browse through the menu will send your saliva glands into overload". Oh dear me – it sounded rather as if one could be wading knee deep in the stuff. Would it be too much of a slight to the memory of Bonaparte were one to fetch up in Wellingtons?

As it was, I needn't have worried: floor as dry as a bone. Walls completely covered in lovely memorabilia: old advertising for Pernod, Ricard, Michelin, various champagnes – flashes of 1930s Cannes and Can-Can. For it would be foolish to overlook the ooh-la-la factor: the zinc bar, you know, once graced a brothel in Lyon. Look – I do understand there's not a lot you can say or do about a fact like that: I am but the dutiful messenger.

I was here for *une grande bouffe* with Jon, the best book editor I have ever had – now editor-in-chief in another publishing house, alas. We attacked the menu with greed to the background of the almost parodic lilting of Montmartre concertina and dear little Edith Piaf, jointly tinkling and gargling on into *la nuit*. Jon entered into the spirit of the thing – tossing aside his jaunty beret, twirling his waxed moustache and sitting there happily in a blue-and-white striped Breton jersey. I had already divested myself of all my burdensome ropes of onions, and was eager now for something called *cubisme de melon* with Bayonne ham, while Jon was having the classic onion soup: this was as gorgeous as it is famed to be, the marvellous cheesy topping forming long and gooey chewing gum strings as he spooned it all down. My *hommage* to Braque turned out to be chunks of cantaloupe and water melon on crushed ice, and good and nuggety ham (chewy in a nice way).

The restaurant was very warm, and after the onion soup, Jon was as hot as a volcano. "I had forgotten it was

Gallic flair and memorabilia abound as **Joseph Connolly** ventures into Covent Garden, but the French ambience is challenged by a high-flying Union Jack. *C'est la vie...*



FACTFILE

- ☐ **MON PLAISIR**, 21 Monmouth Street, WC2 020-7836 7243
- ☐ Open Mon – Fri 12 – 2.15, brasserie 2.15 – 5.45, dinner 5.45 – 11.15. Sat 5.45 – 11.15. Closed Sun.
- ☐ Food: ★★★★★☆☆
- ☐ Service: ★★★★★☆☆
- ☐ Cost: Set lunch £14.50 for two courses, £16.50 for three. A la carte about £100 for two with wine.

summer," he said, as the black iron pot of *coq au vin* was set before him.

This is really more of a winter place, it's true... and it was (have I said this?) very warm indeed. *Coq au vin* is possibly the best thing to order here: it's really proper, the chicken stained dark red throughout. I had four excellent thick slices of roast lamb in a *provençale* sauce, largely because it came with something that translates as truffle bread-and-butter pudding. A bit of a disappointment, really – three flat discs of sort of fried and pummeled bread, and no truffle discernible; the lamb, though, was very fine. When I ordered, I said to the (very) French waitress: "Is it pink, the lamb?" "Is very well done," she replied. "Really? How surprising." "Ah no," she quickly qualified, "not very well done – extremely rare". "Really? How surprising." "No no – is medium. Is pink." Was it all a prank, do you suppose. *A jeu d'esprit?* If so, it was very well done (which these days is extremely rare).

The saute potatoes were actually that, and not just flattish chips as you come to expect. The peas – although they did have shredded lettuce and lardons, as they should – were not very luscious: nothing had melted and fused, you see. Creamed spinach, though, was first rate. And when we'd cleared all that, Jon said he was stepping outside – for air, I assumed (for Lord it was warm). But no – he was

going out for a quick camel, he said (I don't know where he puts it all, you know: I myself was stuffed).

So I sat there, not really listening to the Little Sparrow's twitter and rasp, and downing the last of my *pichet* of house claret (okay – bit drab). I'd ordered a pudding, though – get this: *Contraste Chocopassionnement*. Yes well – passion had to raise its cheeky fevered head at some point, didn't it?

Here was a warm and rude and bubbling chocolate soufflé that hadn't quite set, with a scoop of passion fruit sorbet oozing at its core. Not unerotic. And talking of all that – oh my Lord. In the Gents, forget ooh-la-la – here on the walls is out-and-out vintage pornography. *Zut*. And right next door to this restaurant, you know, is *Coco de Mer* – a classy and expensive sex emporium for women set up by Anita Roddick's daughter (a Body Shop with a difference, then). The window was full of wide-legged pouting mannequins; the signs said "50 Per Cent Off!", though it seemed like a good deal more than that to me. And laid out underneath – somewhat piously, it has to be said – was all manner of extraordinary designer gizmos: tools of the trade, I suppose. They could have called the place *Sacre Bleu*.

A new waitress toddled along, just before I left, with an English accent. "I thought you were all supposed to be French", I said to her. "I am French. My grandfather, he's French – he owns the place. My mother is French – she's the manageress. My father, though – he's Irish, you see". Yes indeed: they get in everywhere. I told her how very, um – steamy it was in here. "You should have said – I could have put the thing on you: that would have cooled you down."

Reader, I made my excuses and left. Jon was on the pavement, sucking a camel. Son plaisir.

☐ *Joseph Connolly's latest book is Faber and Faber: Eighty Years of Book Cover Design (Faber and Faber, £25). www.josephconnolly.co.uk.*

An event book lovers can really get their teeth into

HAM&HIGH restaurant reviewer Joseph Connolly and food writer Victoria Prever will be among the many star attractions at the first ever Hampstead & Highgate Literary Festival next month.

Victoria Prever, who trained as a chef at Leith's School of Food & Wine, will host Writing About Food on Tuesday, September 15, in the company of Claudia Roden, Judith Jones and Jill Norman.

The discussion takes place at the festival venue, Ivy House on North End Road, NW11, from 11am to noon. At 2pm the same day Joseph

Connolly, author of more than 20 novels and non-fiction works, will be on the platform with Amanda Craig for a discussion entitled *The Hampstead Novel?*

The box office is now open and tickets can be bought in advance online at www.hamhighlitfest09.com, where the full programme for can also be viewed.

Other featured writers include Sebastian Faulks, Esther Freud, Justin Somper, Vanessa Feltz, Michael Frayn, Martin Bell, Kathy Lette and Arabella Weir.

Book sales and signing will be held after each event by Daunt Books.

Harry Morgan Specialtea
Afternoon tea for 2 £10.50

Fenwick
Brent Cross level 3, 3-6pm

www.harrymorgans.com