

CHARLIE Brown, the melancholic Peanuts philosopher, when told dismissively to 'go fly a kite', rather soon and poignantly was to discover that he couldn't. The malevolent Lucy, fresh from listing his inadequacies and whipping away the football (again) just as his run-up was in unstoppable flow – she could, she could fly a kite. Beethoven aficionado Schroeder – he could. Linus – sucking a thumb and nuzzling his blanket – he could too. Even Snoopy could fly a kite, for heaven's sake (but then he could pilot a Tiger Moth and outgun the Red Baron himself). But poor ol' Charlie Brown – his kite would either snag on the only tree for miles around, or else plummet to the ground in common with his spirits (such feelings betrayed by the contour of his mouth – a squiggle of French's mustard on a hot dog).

I yearned to reach out to him, to assure him that he was not alone – urge him to hot-foot it across the Pond to London Town and ultimately Parliament Hill where he would, most summers, have encountered a soulmate: to wit, me. Because I could never fly a bloody kite either. All around were chortling and ruddy-faced kiddies excitedly tugged by the uplifting strength of their cheapos from Woolworth's, while ludicrously serious middle-aged confirmed and balding bachelors would operate their swooping and soaring professional models for all the world as if there was a point to it. And me? Usually winding up the string again, or inspecting a broken strut – when not haring along for miles in a coronary-inducing and breathless endeavour to get this damn bloody heap of junk airborne, Christ's sake, while all the while it would happily bump along the ground behind me, pointing derisively and laughing like a drain.

And of course I was reminded of all this just the other week while wandering again on the summit of Parliament Hill, on my way to a part of the Borough I seldom get to. I would specify where, but here is the Place With No Name. All I can tell you is that it's nearly opposite the entrance to the Heath on a road made mad by buses and it's sort of Gospel Oak, but not really –

More fun and game in the pub, Charlie Brown

A hapless kite flier as a boy – like the melancholic Peanuts character – **Joseph Connolly** can now saunter past the show-offs on Parliament Hill to The Bull and Last – a gastropub that's living up to its hype

way down from Highgate, just a bit up from Kentish Town and not quite Dartmouth Park (which doesn't, of course, exist). Anyway – there. The lure was The Bull and Last, which seems to have a bit of word-of-mouth going for it: the buzz is out there. It's a handsome corner Victorian pub, the colour of decent Belgian chocolate, its name in muted gold. Vast hanging baskets of trailing fuchsia and red geraniums lent it a festive air – and inside it's suitably cosy in the accepted jerry-built hotchpotch manner of the sort of gastropub that is eager to underline its homemade, not-trying-too-hard all thrown together look (as opposed to the other sort which resemble a mortuary with maybe an accent of orange Perspex). So what we have here is all the traditional corncicing and proper oak bar, working ceiling fans, pine floor, 'Tudor' stone fireplace, old and odd gateleg tables and a motley crew of pews and chairs, many with the little box at the back which once housed a hymnal. The owners seem to have acquired a job lot of battleship grey and maroon gloss paint which has been applied in a reasonably random manner and is, to be fair, pretty horrible, but not so much that you can truly mind. There is a collection of old pewter tankards nailed up close to the ceiling, for some reason. Haunted, moody music of the sort produced by those thin and druggy swaying youths at the Bronze in Buffy the Vampire Slayer (you want culture? I give you culture). This was augmented by the seemingly mandatory bawling baby. They used to be in cots and creches – now they are all in restaurants and pubs.

My wife and I got a nice little



Vast hanging baskets of trailing fuchsia and red geraniums lend the pub a festive air ... Joseph at The Bull and Last.

table close to the bar and set to filleting the lengthy menu. This is authentic, homemade food, and quirky too: snails and bacon, scallops with black pudding, plum chutney and deep fried duck tongues ... see? She, being far more game than I, went for the charcuterie selection, at a tanner: duck prosciutto (if I were a duck, you know, I wouldn't come within a mile of this place), chicken liver parfait (very much liked – sublimely smooth, "praline-y", she said), pork rillettes, terrine and – the star of

the show – breaded pig's head. I know – it makes for a wonderful image, but it wasn't an actual head, but a perfect cube, intensely flavoured. The whole lot was served on a thick teak board with cornichons and toast, and God, she really did love it. "Lovely ..." she said. And then a bit later on "lovely ...". And at the end: "Mm ... that was lovely". Okay, samey – but you must know it's sincere. I was equally happy with my steak hache (£12) – good chopped steak formed into a deep and seriously juicy burger. It was

FACTFILE

THE BULL AND LAST

168 Highgate Road, NW5
Tel: 020-7267 3641

Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆

Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆

Cost: £50 to £60 for two, with drink. More expensive upstairs at weekends, but still good value.

offered with frites, but I had seen as a side 'triple cooked chips', so had to have them instead. Twice cooked is old hat, it would appear: soon we'll see chips that have been cooked so terribly often as to have vaporised into the atmosphere. Anyway – they were great; more like some strange hybrid of pot roast and croquette than actual chip, but unarguably great. The accompanying watercress was so fresh and flavourful that I actually ate it – I almost never finish up my greens.

My wife was still muttering "lovely ..." periodically, and seeing off the last of her Kirin, a lightish Japanese lager. I attended to my chilled Brouilly, and tried to blank out the bawling baby as I studied the puds. (They always smile benignly, the parents, you know; either so sleep-deprived as to be stunned and immune, or else imagining it to be as charming for us as it is for them. I was yearning for Elton John or Madonna to waltz in and make them a cash offer on the spot).

Millefeuille of raspberry and lavender ice cream for the wife – as layered, crisp and creamy as you could desire, the lavender in the ice cream coming over beautifully and subtly in the

spooky aftertaste. I felt ambassadorial as I ordered Ferrero Rocher ice cream (and with the sheer amount, they were spoiling me). First class, but far too much, so I finished it.

Throughout the meal, my wife was convinced that I'd been clocked by the waiter – who turned out to be one of the three very able and charming proprietors – but I wasn't really: he only remembered me from when he was working at The Wolsley. He was wise to break out on his own: this is gastropub as it should be done. I asked him (Joe, his name is) why the place is called The Bull and Last (hotly eager to bring to you all sorts of rib-ticklers about cobblers and awls). Well according to him, it's called that because it's The Bull, see, and the last pub before Kentish Town. Which is very near, and where there are about another five hundred. Urban legends, eh? You can't lick 'em. On the way out I noticed the stuffed and mounted heads on the wall: three different breeds of bull, a fox and a hare. So far, no baby.

We wandered back to Hampstead across the Heath, and on past the Magdala Tavern in South End Green, the scene of Ruth Ellis's murder of her lover in the 1950s. Marvellous, isn't it really? Now, you can't even smoke in a pub – in those days you could shoot people. No look, I'm only being provocative – just throwing up a kite, is all I'm doing: seeing if it flies.

Joseph Connolly's latest novel is *Jack The Lad and Bloody Mary* (Faber and Faber, £8.99). All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

Fine wines – but at recession-busting prices

A RECESSION-busting initiative that prompts the drinking of finer wine: surely that can't make commercial sense? But for restaurateur Ian Davies it does. And it must be leaving his customers smiling.

The scheme is this: wines normally listed at £75 or £40 are now on offer (if you have the right voucher) at £25 or £15, levels of mark-up which would make most in the trade weep.

Davies, who runs The Rotisserie chain – two restaurants in the heart of Ham&Highland, in Fortune Green Road, West Hampstead, and Allitsen Road, St John's Wood, plus others in Whetstone and Hatch End – is as imaginative as his cuisine is simple.

For much of the year, he has been putting bums on all available seats with a variety of discounts. When simple reductions palled,

he had the summery idea of offering a percentage off the bill equal to the day's 3pm temperature. Fortunately for him, July was cool...

But this is a wine column, so let's look at the current offer, which runs until the end of November. The wines come from Bibendum in Primrose Hill and I had the chance to taste five of them at the B Festival late last month (I hope lots of Ham&High readers were at the sell-out consumer session because there were some splendid bottles there).

For me, the red star was Gigondas Domaine Font-Sane 2006 (£15), perfumed, balanced, fresh, an edge of something flowery to its dark fruit, herb and spice flavours – a perfect partner to a decent steak.

If Bordeaux rather than the Rhone appeals, Les Tourelles de Longueville, Pauillac 2006 (£25) is a classic, smooth and complex, needing food to mellow its robust

tannins. Laid-back Californian more your style? Soft red fruit dominates in the serious but very easy-drinking Marmesa Cabrillo Peak pinot noir 2007 (£15). Other reds should be as good: a Margaret River shiraz from Howard Park (£15) and peak Argentine malbec from Catena (£25).

My favourite of the whites was also a Rhone-style blend – but from Michelton in Victoria's Goulburn Valley. Airstrip (£15) is the sort of wine you need a sommelier to describe: its fragrant mix of marsanne, roussanne and viognier has so much going on, from green fruits to tropical voluptuousness. Definitely a wine for tiger prawns grilled with no fussy accompaniments.

I found the Californian white, Morgan Monterey sauvignon blanc 2006 (£15) pleasant but far less interesting; better pay £10 more for Meursault Villages from Michelot.

Davies admits that until now most of his customers haven't been wine adventurers, making house wines by far the biggest sellers. "This is getting our customers to enjoy a better quality wine at a very good price," he says. And he hopes the enjoyment will prompt a longer-term effect on wine choices in his restaurants.

It's an approach which delights Bibendum director Michael Saunders, who told me he was laughed off the platform at a recent trade conference

when he suggested restaurateurs should consider reducing their sometimes eye-wateringly greedy margins on wine.

A final word: I'm not writing this column because Davies is advertising in the Ham&High (for the discounted wines you must have a printed voucher from the paper, or download one from www.the.rotisserie.co.uk, and it's wise to book). It is simply far too good an opportunity to miss.

LIZ SAGUES

URBANSOLUTIONS
SMARTER PROPERTY MAINTENANCE

HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

If a tub of filler or tube of sealant has become hard in cold weather, particularly likely to happen when it has been stored in your shed, dunk them into a bucket of warm water for about half an hour before you want to use it.

www.urbansolutions.co.uk 020-7435 1111

WINE FAIR COMPETITION

YOU still have a chance to win tickets to the hottest wine event in the lead-up to Christmas – the Wine Fair at Vinopolis organised by The Wine Gang on November 7.

Five pairs of free tickets to the morning session are on offer. Just enter the simple competition you'll find by logging on to www.thewinegang.com/hh.htm – the answer is on the Christmas Wine Fair information page on the website or in the Ham&High wine column of October 8.

Deadline is now midnight on October 25.