

**G**LUTTONS, luses and loafers who have been knocking around London for quite a fair while will sometimes (and usually over the course of a long and boozy lunch) bend the conversation to the bars, the clubs, the restaurants of yore – those which, due to the alchemy of media and the moment, were magically lit up and hot for either years or just a season, then just mysteriously fading from the collective consciousness. The knack, of course – as every ambitious restaurateur is most horribly aware – is to hit the pinnacle of fame and fashionability as fast as a flambe, and then (here's the tricky bit) to stay up there for ever. Very few can pull this off: The Ivy, Le Caprice, J. Sheekey (all Richard Caring affairs) have managed it, as has, more recently, The Wolseley. In terms of clubs, Annabel's and The Groucho are still right up there. Le Gavroche is the odd man out – still supreme and actually all about true gastronomy, all the others being no more really than reliable brasseries.

But what of the establishments that used to be on everyone's lips, in everyone's diaries and dominating the newspapers ... and now just aren't? When was the last time you heard a dicky bird about the nightclub Tramp? Or the quite madly overrated San Lorenzo in Beauchamp Place? The attraction here seemed to be that Hollywood A-listers and Princess Diana were mothered and smothered (to the exclusion of simply hungry nobodies), then permitted to hand over great piles of cash for a small and so-so bowl of spaghetti. And get papped on the way out: guaranteed. And what of Quaglino's, that great subterranean glitter-box in Bury Street which Terence Conran reopened in a burst of glory and endless publicity in 1993? I used to love it – went there all the time. Can't remember the last occasion, though – so who goes there now, I wonder? And then there's the daddy of them all: Langan's Brasserie, the restaurant in Stratton Street which redefined everything. Up until 1972, when Peter Langan fell face forward into the restaurant scene, all 'fine dining'

# Langan's keeps its fizz

Back in the 70s, the brasserie was the party place of choice attracting the likes of Mick Jagger and David Bailey. But while other stars have faded, this legendary spot is still shining brightly, discovers **Joseph Connolly**



Still a fine place to be ... Joseph Connolly in Langan's.

establishments were hushed, starchy, bleeding expensive and usually not actually all that good (although no-one would dare to breathe a word). Or there were the great hotels with their silver trolleys held on to grimly as if they were rather grand Zimmer frames by waiters seemingly as ancient as the establishments themselves.

And lo – tout d'un coup – there was Langan's. This large and blowsy palace became overnight the epitome of trendiness, a whole new bonfire of the inanities refusing to relinquish the fab and swinging 60s, blasting off yet more fireworks into the sky as that decade's icons – Mick Jagger, David Bailey and all the usual suspects – resolutely partied on. Here was casual in a new and easy sense, but still quite a dressy-up affair. The welcoming bar and front of house, the eclectic collection of furniture,

lighting and – famously – pictures, together with the enormous menu of things that people actually love to eat ... this was a slickly glamorous and winning combination. And just the other week, I was at an exhibition opening at the Belgravia Gallery in Albemarle Street – new paintings by the very talented Michael Molloy (writer, artist and jolly good friend of mine) and afterwards my mind was turning to food, as it so often will. Do you know, I was musing ... we're awfully close to Langan's ... when was I last in Langan's ...? Don't know – can't remember. "Who eats there nowadays?" I wondered out loud. And so my wife and I thought we'd go and find out.

The good news is – you walk in, and it's as if you've never been away. The baroque and very Parisian hall and bar are just the same, that wrought iron staircase clambering grandly. The job lot

of odd lampshades still glint and wink and the large card menu (handwritten weekly) still is graced by David Hockney's pastels of Langan and others. Hockney was an habitue who, in true Lautrec fashion, painted and drew in exchange for his drink and nosh. Michael Caine was a backer, as was Richard Shepherd – now the ebullient owner of this and others such as the sister-gaff Odin's in Devonshire Street and the eponymous Shepherd's in Westminster, where MPs congregate to spend their expenses. And then there was the highly unpredictable host himself (who, in time, became all too predictable): the loud, louche and legless Langan, happily bending over backwards (and then a bit later, falling over altogether) in his efforts to discharge his duties, in exchange for his drink and drink.

On a Thursday evening, the place was heaving. In the bar I

## FACTFILE

**LANGAN'S BRASSERIE**  
Stratton Street, W1  
Tel: 020-7491 8822  
Open Monday to Thursday 12.15pm to 11pm, Friday to Saturday 12.15pm to 11.30pm  
Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆  
Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆  
Cost: About £100 for two, a la carte, for three courses with wine

bumped into my chum Richard Littlejohn, the Daily Mail's star columnist: he's a regular. Although there are fewer of the glitterati these days – lots of American tourists, birthday get-togethers and business letting-off-steampans – it's still got such a buzz. Because this was an impromptu thing and we hadn't booked, we were shown to a table upstairs in what is called the Venetian Room, in honour of the 360-degree mural of the city painted by the underrated artist Patrick Procktor, at Langan's behest (and again in exchange for protein and much alcohol). In the old days, of course, upstairs was social death: the ground floor – and preferably by the window – was the only place to be. Punters at the time worked out a way to ensure that this was always guaranteed: it became known as The Souffle Trick. You phoned for a table and pre-ordered either the legendary savoury souffle or else a fruity one for pudding. These airy concoctions could not survive the long journey up to the Venetian Room, and so your downstairs status table was assured. Happy, silly days. Now on the landing they've got life-size models of Laurel and Hardy, covered in tourists' lipstick kisses.

It was late, and we were starving. I had excellent prosciutto – and plenty of it – and my wife had a calves' liver salad which, like everything here, was vast: pretty much a meal in itself. Just as well, actually, because the swordfish she had ordered as a main was rather dry and clothly – which swordfish can be, of course, though maybe this had been hanging around a bit under hot lights. By contrast, my roast maize-fed Landaise chicken with thyme and parsley stuffing, bacon, bread sauce, green beans and saute potatoes was just absolutely sublime: true and tender, deeply gratifying, real roast flavour – and fully half a chicken, no messing. They don't do prissy little dribbles here, with drizzlings of brightly coloured something or other: this is big grub, done well. The very drinkable (too drinkable) house red is just a vin de table, but by Georges Duboeuf, the main man in Beaujolais – only £16.50, and it slips down a treat. Quite often. The crème brulee ...? Ecstatic. Where have I had such a good one ...? Shall I tell you where? Quaglino's. I know. So I'm going back there too, soon – and if it's kept its fizz like Langan's, it'll be a blast.

Poor old Peter Langan. At home one evening nearly 20 years ago, he fell over once too often and managed to set the house on fire. Died a few days later. Poor old Patrick Procktor – he was never the same after a fire in his flat in 1999 destroyed all his favourite things, including a legendary collection of hats; he died three years later. And as my wife and I, well pleased, toddled out of Langan's, two fire engines were screaming up Piccadilly. We looked at one another, nodded, turned around, and rapidly legged it.

Joseph Connolly's latest novel is *Jack The Lad and Bloody Mary* (Faber and Faber, £8.99). All past restaurant reviews may be seen on the redesigned page on the website [www.josephconnolly.co.uk](http://www.josephconnolly.co.uk).

## Discoveries made in a grand tour of Italy

**A**LL too often, the most frustrating aspect of a wine tasting is encountering wonderful wines yet being unable to buy them here. That happens often at generic tastings – where a single country puts its wine wares on show, but where many of the producers have yet to find UK markets. It's also frequently true of tastings run by big agencies, who don't deal directly with consumers or direct their selling efforts to the restaurant trade.

Happily, that's not the case with London-based Liberty Wines, which is staggering under the weight of the trade awards it has won this year.

One of those – for the ninth time in 11 years – was the International Wine Challenge Italian Specialist Merchant of the Year title. So at the company's autumn tasting, it seemed sensible to focus on the bottles

from Italy. I wasn't alone. Half the London restaurant trade seemed to be there too, with sommeliers' badges carrying some very respected names indeed.

But enough of celebrity-spotting, back to the wines. All are available direct from Liberty, though minimum order is a 12-bottle case (can be mixed). Retail stockists in or close to Ham&Highland are listed and Liberty is happy to answer inquiries and offer more suggestions. Phone 020-7720 5350 or email [info@libertywine.co.uk](mailto:info@libertywine.co.uk).

There were a number of wines I know and love – Pieropan's classic Soave (£11,

Highbury Vintners, Philglas & Swigott, Nebuchadnezzar Wines), wonderfully crisp and fresh yet with great depth; complex, impressive Donnafugata Polena (£11, Oddbins); Livio Felluga's serious, structured Sharis (£15, Whole Foods Market).

But as ever, there were discoveries. The most interesting was a rich, aromatic, almost chewy vermentino 2007 from Poggio Al Tesoro (£15, The Sampler), with levels of flavour equal to those I'd expect from a benchmark white Burgundy. Even at £15, it is a value-for-money wine.

The Liberty buyers' palates identify great cheaper wines, too. Cantina di Monteforte Soave Classico 2008 (£6) builds up from a gentle nose into a wine with great character, while

the 2007 Superiore (£7.50, Lemon Monkey), more concentrated and intense, also offers a lot for its price. Go back up to £11 and Cantine Belisario Verdicchio del Cerro is another special wine, gentle yet serious, aromatic and enjoyable.

Fascinating, too, was the chance to compare pinot grigios. This time, the table included examples from beyond Italy and it was Australia which shone, with Innocent Bystander 2008 (£10, Selfridges, Harvey Nichols) adding complexity to dry, spice-touched fruitiness, a serious food wine. Liberty's main European challenger was from Alsace, Cave de Hunawirh reserve 2007 (£11), honeyed yet crisp and very delicious.

The same interest came in the riesling selection, which prompted my most voluninous notes. Old world stars: Domaine Pfister Silberberg 2007 (£15.50)

and Cave de Hunawirh Grand Cru Rosacker 2007 (£15); and the new: Wild Earth 2008 from Central Otago (£13, The Sampler, Highbury Vintners).

Almost no space left and not a single red mentioned... But I had spent so long on the whites that my palate was protesting. I tried a few, but couldn't do them justice, though I am happy to share two

favourites: A Mano Primitivo di Puglia 2007 (£8, Philglas & Swigott, Highbury Vintners, Mill Hill Wines) and Gran Sasso Montepulciano d'Abruzzo Colline Teramane 2005 (£13, Highbury Vintners).

Sorry, I couldn't face the remainder of the 399 bottles...

LIZ SAGUES



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