

# Run away from the Circus

**W**HEN I was a short-trousered St Anthony's schoolboy, the words 'Piccadilly Circus' were almost as thrilling and packed with the rush of delight as 'Christmas Eve'. And sometimes on that very day I would be taken there, in order to fulfil the sometime ritual of 'seeing the lights'. Pleasures were simple in those days (and preferably free) but the sight and sparkle of Regent Street, the silvery glints and refractions on the glossy paintwork in the nose-to-tail and crawling procession of Humbers, Rovers, Daimlers, Austins, Sunbeams and – in our case – a purple Triumph Herald – were, to young eyes and an exploding mind, truly the stuff of wonder.

Among the attractions of the Circus itself was a News Cinema – the lure for me being not so much the crowing cockerel that ushered in the Pathe pictorial as the dizzily coloured American cartoons: Mickey and Donald, of course, but also the zanier Bugs Bunny, Tom and Jerry and – my favourite – Tweety and Sylvester: I did the enjoy thitting out my syllables just like Thylveste did (much to my mother's dithgutht). Also there, believe it or not, was a subterranean and pleasingly threatening dingy dive – completely open to children – incorporating a tattoo parlour and a shooting gallery: real .22 rifles, real bullets, and at the end you got your riddled target reeled back in, and if you'd hit the bull they gave you a silver badge with a lethal pin that said 'Marksman'. I kept them until long after they all went green.

Now, though, Piccadilly Circus seems to be a perfectly wretched place. The huge neon adverts still are, apparently, a major attraction to tourists – the younger, poorer and seemingly more miserable of whom ritually squat like clusters of pigeons at the base of Eros, grazing on triangles of pizza and stubbing out Marlboro Lights. As to the neon – the spinning great Coca-Cola roundel is long gone, as is the pendulum clock telling

After being rendered even more beautiful, The Criterion offers a respite from Tourist Central's gawdiness. It's just a shame that the food still doesn't live up to the glamour, finds **Joseph Connolly**



**Joseph at The Criterion.**

you it's Guinness Time. No Bovril either: it's all just Asian electronics, and desperately dull. Policemen in Kevlar vests are on the prowl. Fast food detritus kicks at your feet. And then you glimpse the oasis that is the Criterion Restaurant, seducing you with at once the kiss of peace, the pizzazz of glamour. So in you wander.

What a conundrum this place

is. Situated at the hub of Tourist Central, one of the most famous piazzas on earth, and boasting one of London's truly gorgeous interiors ... and yet no-one has managed to make it work. It's been Forte-d and Marco-d, it's been cheap and expensive, vulgar and sedate, boarded up altogether and constantly resurrected ... but always the verdict has been the same: glorious room, shame

about the food. Well now it's up and running in yet another brand new incarnation – sold last spring to a Russian oligarch and rendered even more beautiful by a lush yet sensitive restoration.

We have here a sumptuous ballroom, dating from 1874 – a bit Turkish, a lot Byzantine, and with even a nod towards the last days of the Raj. Marble pillars and walls, the ceiling a miracle of gold mosaic and lit by hundreds of tiny bulbs on branches that are even more golden. There are bronzed art deco mirrors and standard lamps – comfortable banquettes strewn with Tiffany blue cushions; also a deep and stripey carpet, a thing in a restaurant I always approve of. At lunchtime on a sunny Friday, though, there were only three other tables taken out of possibly a hundred (at one of them sat a lady very natively got up in indigo silk, a feathered hat, much gold jewellery and bright red nails. Her bloke slouched opposite her in a light grey T-shirt). There is also horrible 1970s disco music, of all things. I asked for it to be turned down (in lieu of its being destroyed) and it was, immediately.

I was here to meet Dotti Irving, a byword in the book world. She is head honcho of her own company Colman Getty, the leading PR agency for all things literary, with such clients as Nigella Lawson and J.K. Rowling (whoever he is) as well as many corporations. Why is it called Colman Getty? Because she thought that Colman (as in mustard) evoked a solid and British reliability, and Getty smelled of Yankee money. Cute. She arrived looking as blonde and chic as ever, utterly unfazed by the fact that the huge Man Booker Prize presentation dinner, which she has run for ever, was only three days away. "That wee thing ..." she said (Scottish, you know). "Well I have good people." Very modest, you see.

## FACTFILE

### THE CRITERION RESTAURANT

224 Piccadilly

Tel: 020-7930 0488

Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆

Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆

Cost: Set lunch about £70 for two courses for two with wine. A la carte considerably more.

There's a set lunch – £18 for two courses, £23 for three. I've always thought it rather annoying, though, to have a choice of four mains on a set lunch, where two of them attract a £3 supplement: makes it all a bit of a nonsense. Anyway – from that set menu, Dotti had the pea and broad bean soup ("not bad – thick and comforting", is what she said – although she might have been talking about me). I had moules marinieres – plump and yummy in a fine and spoonable creamy sauce, but half of them had not opened (and therefore should not have been served) leaving me with just 10: a cruel disappointment. Then she went for a slimmish chunk of grilled organic salmon on samphire with beurre blanc. It looked overdone, but she said it was pretty good: she did love the samphire. She fared rather better than I, then: fusilli, parmesan and new season peas. New season? Really? In October? I queried this to the very French waitress, and she buzzed off to check. Yes, apparently – delivered that morning. Where from? "Ze garden Englands" she said (been in London 17 years, she was telling me, and still she sounded like Inspector Clouseau). Anyway – they were peas: could have come from ze garden Englands, could have come from ze Eye of ze Birds, I honestly couldn't tell you. The fusilli, alas, was just what it said on the packet from

whence it had rattled: fusilli, boiled, and that's it. With a sprinkle of dusty parmesan. No attempt at a sauce whatever. Now look: 10 mussels and a handful of watery pasta is not great value for £18. Is it? No, I thought not.

We've known each other for many years, Dotti and I, but she's never before mentioned her mother, Sheila: 93, and still living independently in Scotland. Recently she asked to be taken to the Groucho Club, of which Dotti and I have long been members, because she was of the opinion that Dotti spent far too much time there altogether, and she wanted to vet it for suitability. On the evening they went, it was rammed and raucous, as sometimes it can be. "I thought," she said, "it was for ladies only." Not the case – the male gyrating hips just inches from her face forming ample testimony. She loved it all – had a whale of a time, and downed three whiskies. I think I might have to ask her out to lunch.

Dotti was drinking Chablis (good) and I was drinking Cote de Rhone (also good). We had another glass and gossiped bookishly. Dotti's blouse was dotty, and so was my tie: rather sweet, don't you think? No? Oh well. Look – we had a great time, but only really because we always do. And the verdict? Glorious room, shame about the food. Maybe the a la carte is rather more up to it, but otherwise ... no change there, then.

So what shall we do now? Can't go down to the shooting gallery, alas. Can't even see Tweety and Sylvester. Shame. I was really in the mood for thomething thilly.

Joseph Connolly's latest book is *Faber and Faber: Eighty Years of Book Cover Design (Faber and Faber, £25)*. All past restaurant reviews may be seen on the redesigned page at the website [www.josephconnolly.co.uk](http://www.josephconnolly.co.uk).

# Floral and spicy flavours from Roussillon

**M**Y EARLY summer jaunt to Roussillon in southern France is long past, but the memories remain – and there are pleasures I haven't yet shared, so here goes.

The last day of tasting took us into the hills south of the Maury to the Preceptorie de Centernach. The winery is located in one of the big, bleak, now out-moded

co-operatives of the region at St Arnac, a name adapted from Centernach, a Knights Templar holding – even the panoply of French saints doesn't include an Arnac. But there's nothing out-moded about the project, which is an expansion of the highly-respected La Rectorie, at Banyuls, into a similar and not too distant terroir.

The scattered vineyards, in two zones differing in geology and microclimate, cover 40 hectares and are on the way to becoming fully organic. Inside the winery, the walk-in concrete tanks have been ingeniously converted into barrel cellars.

From the outset, in 2001, practices have been unchanged – retention of old vines, early harvest for freshness, rigorous selection, minimum intervention in the cellar, oak used to soften not dominate.

The resulting wines are very attractive indeed. I'd happily have drained a glass of all those poured by Aurelie Pereira, who had just moved from running the cellar to a marketing role.

The Wine Society ([www.thewinesociety.com](http://www.thewinesociety.com)) currently lists the stylish, floral and mineral Coume Marie Cotes du Roussillon blanc 2007 (£10.95) and Coume Marie rose

2007 (£9.95), a serious, long-flavoured pink wine for winter drinking with a mature spicy edge to its juicy fruit.

Pereira is passionate about the wines of the region but acknowledges there is a marketing mountain still to scale.

"In the last 15 to 20 years, there has been a revolution – but we don't have the history of Bordeaux or Burgundy. People don't understand that you can buy great wine in Roussillon."

Someone who does is Katie Jones, who worked for 16 years to promote the wines of Mont Tauch, just across the hills in Languedoc.

Last May, she quit her job as marketing director to concentrate on freelance projects and to make her own wine – in Maury.

Walk among her old bush vines, on a marvellously sited two-hectare plot directly beneath the impossibly balanced Cathar

castle of Queribus, and you can understand why she chose it.

Sturdy, healthy vines grow in near soil-less schist. On one side lies the garrigue, on the other a much larger domaine recently bought by an ambitious American.

The high proportion of grenache gris – about half of the 8,000 vines – delighted her and the main product of the 2009 vintage will be a high-quality dry white.

"The harvest was of excellent quality," she reports. "My 80-year-old vines have such low yields that I don't think they can go much lower even in times of drought like 2009. We will produce one bottle of wine for every two vines."

She will be selling exclusively direct to consumers and plans to tour UK wine clubs next spring.

The white will be ready in March and the reds – 2009, she



**Aurelie Pereira.**

says, will be the year of carignan – in the autumn (contact [katie@domaonejones.fr](mailto:katie@domaonejones.fr) for more details). There are treats in store.

LIZ SAGUES

## URBANSOLUTIONS

SMARTER PROPERTY MAINTENANCE

### HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

When descaling taps or shower heads, an easy solution is to place a plastic bag filled with a mixture of vinegar and water, secured with an elastic band over the top and leave it overnight. Once removed, they'll be flowing straight and true like they used to.

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