

THE Conran Shop in Marylebone High Street is a fairly dangerous place to linger, should you be headily appreciative of colour and design: just about everything in there is instantly and shamefully covetable. And this Christmas, the windows are particularly enticing and spectacular with perfectly arranged and packaged pyramids of alternately vital desirabilia, and gaudily pretty trifles. All is lit with coloured filters creating the very warmest glow, bars and spangles of red and yellow shimmering in the wet and cold of the pavement beyond. These two primaries are the backbone of the theme – tenting and swags in Harlequin diamonds, parted seductively in the manner of a medieval tent. At a jousting contest, say – alive with fluttering pennants. The sort of thing cavorted in by one of the Knights Who Say Ni, it occurs to me ... or maybe as a resting place for crusaders in quest of the Holy Grail. The good news being that in terms of lunching out, the Holy Grail is exactly what I was poised on the verge of achieving: a properly run and grown-up restaurant serving excellent food, and in the very best sort of company. Because just above this Conran glitter-box of delights lies Ortery (there is no The) – initially opened and run by the great man Terence himself, though now part of the D & D group. An ortery, by the way, is an eighteenth century clockwork model of the solar system: restaurant names, I'm telling you – law unto themselves.

Anyway – I was here to meet Michael Palin, and not before time. He used to come into The Flask Bookshop in the old days, and we've been bumping into one another for years at various bookish dos and openings and so on, hurrying over the briefest sorts of chats which is all such events can ever allow. We have been just about for ever mutually threatening something such as lunch, and now the day was come.

The Holy Grail of dining

Joseph Connolly shares a joke and a delicious meal with former Monty Python star Michael Palin at Ortery in the Conran Shop in Marylebone High Street and manages to get a lot of his Christmas shopping done too

It's not an easy room, being as long and narrow as a train, though made very pleasingly light and elegant – rather more ship-like, actually, what with the whiteness, fanlights and jaunty porthole windows. I had asked for a discreet and tucked away table, though I needn't really have bothered: only five others taken, all the diners being chaps in suits with not one single lady who lunches. Michael entered, as calm and affable as ever – but God, he's been busy lately, what with the publication of the second volume of his diaries *Halfway To Hollywood* (much recommended) and the fortieth anniversary of some or other old TV programme called *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. He still can barely believe the New York end of all that, when it was insisted that all five remaining Pythons (Graham Chapman died in 1989) travel the fifty yards from their hotel to the celebration venue by stretch limo. As in one stretch limo each.

"You're Gilliam," grunted Michael's driver. "No," he apologised. "I'm Palin, actually." "Says here Gilliam." And then, with finality: "You're Gilliam". Which is something of a change: Michael has lost track of the number of times he has been accosted by strangers accusing him of being Eric Idle. Does he mind? He smiles his very likeable and crinkly-eyed smile: of course he doesn't mind.

The menu du jour is £26 for three courses – good value indeed, as you will see – while a la carte could be rather ruinous at just two courses for £41, with loads of £8 supplements. The set



lunch, though, is full of good things – the item on the menu that Michael immediately zoned in upon being the name of the head waiter: Graziano P. Arricale. "It's the P that does it," he chuckled. We would have made something too of the name of the ex-Mirabelle Michelin starred chef – but it is Igor Tymchyshyn, and neither of us could pronounce it. Then, deciding that this was getting very silly indeed, Michael went for pate de campagne, toasted Poilane – the king of breads – and apricot chutney, this to be followed by cep tagliatelle,

tartufuto and parmesan (well what did you suppose he'd order? Slapped fish? Spam? A dead carrot?). I was having smoked salmon tartare with fromage blanc, and then partridge aux cassoulettes. But first, a frothy freebie: a lovely warm shot glass of wild mushroom veloute – wonderfully soft and intense, the sort of teaser you want not to end. The waiter rattled off all the names of all the breads, which made us rather giggle in our effort to remember just one of them. "I'll have the brown ..." he said. "And I'll take that white thing

there," I chimed in happily.

"This is," said Michael, "an upmarket pate," as he eagerly devoured it. "Smooth, and very delicious". My smoked salmon was first rate too – a perfect square of it on a perfect square plate, with egglets of fromage blanc, little curls of more salmon and a couple of cubes of aspic: an expert blend of art and mathematics.

I put it to Michael that rumours abounded that there were still remaining one or two pockets of Gospel Oak which he did not yet own – this a reference to his erstwhile habit of buying a succession of houses next door (a diary entry of 1981 has him offering £26,500 for one of them). He has no plans for further expansion, however, and nor is he about to move. He has lived there very happily with his wife Helen and three children (now flown) for decades: after all his famous global travelling, it is a wonderful place to get back to. Talking of which – this year he was elected president of the National Geographical Society, yet another accolade which he wears with customary modesty.

More grub: Michael was very impressed with the moistness and good deep flavour of his tagliatelle – he is quite a foodie and wine lover, lunch being one of his favourite things – and my cassoulet was absolutely perfect: slices of tender and gorgeously rich partridge and a lovely stewy soup of various beans and celery (I slaver just to think of it), the

FACTFILE

- ORREY**
- 55 Marylebone High Street, W1.
- Tel: 020-7616 8000
- Open Monday to Saturday 12pm-2.30pm, 6.30pm-10.30pm. Sunday 6.30pm-10pm
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆
- Cost: lunch menu du jour about £100 for two, with wine

very silky and resilient Loire Valley Sancerre coping with its flavours remarkably well. And then, for any of us who suspected our palates might by now be quite filthy, there came a cleanser: a refreshing splodge of vanilla crème fraiche over a spoon of stewed apple and topped with – get this – blackberry powder. Only I was piggish enough to follow this with a pudding, and I am gloatingly pleased that I did: a prune and armagnac soufflé – perfect narrow cylinder this time – light and moussy (though further down it still was cooking, which rather took the edge off it) with a hillock of cognac ice cream. And yes, the cognac was something completely different from the rawer armagnac of the soufflé: comforting and mellow.

Not unlike my guest, as a matter of fact. Grazing on the complimentary chox, I could have listened to him for ever – wonderful memories of his very good friendship with George Harrison (a great fan of that schlocky old TV series *Dynasty*, we learn from the diaries), Michael's insistence – though with eyes set into a mischievous twinkle – that John Cleese is Basil Fawty (no two ways about it) and his easy tolerance of the Python geeks who quote to him verbatim snippets of sketches he can't even remember having written or performed. Terry Jones (clever, eh? I've now mentioned all of them) has recently moved to Highgate and he and Michael sometimes enjoy a pint in a pub which I'd better not identify, to save them both from being driven to the brink by beery blokes babbling on about the Norwegian Blue's beautiful plumage.

We left happy, and very well fed – well short, though, of the level of Mr Creosote – Michael heading off to record the Graham Norton show. "He did do us proud, didn't he?" Michael was musing. "Graziano P. Arricale..." I have a very strong feeling, you know, that this man's name will live for ever more.

Order wine from your armchair

SIT back, pour a glass of something you've selected from last week's seasonal recommendations and relax: last-minute wine-related shopping can be done from the comfort of home. That's one of the great advantages of the internet – and it's not yet too late. All the sites below can deliver before Christmas.

First, bottles. WineBeerExpress works on the very simple model of order one day by 6pm, receive your case (six bottles minimum) the next day. Log on to www.winebeerexpress.com for a very decent choice of classics, familiar names and rarer bottles – like these two excellent Spanish reds, warm and spicy La Riada old vines garnacha 2007, £5, and stylish Abadengo Crianza 2004, £11. There are well-priced mixed cases, too. Delivery is £6, Christmas order deadline Tuesday for Wednesday delivery.

Still on Spanish temptations, think Torres – but not only wine. Alongside a bottle of the serious but approachable cabernet sauvignon/tempranillo Gran Coronas 2005, the Torres Food and Wine box contains Arbequina extra virgin olive oil, Bonito de Norte white tuna line-caught in the Bay of Biscay and Manzanilla olives hand-harvested near Seville.

The box costs £38 from on-line delicatessen www.edeli.co.uk, which has many more Spanish delicacies. For Ham&High readers, edeli has extended the Christmas order deadline to midday tomorrow – specify next day delivery (£8.95) and enter 'Ham&High' in the



comment box at checkout.

Yet more Spanish delights: specialist merchant Moreno in Maida Vale offers a vinous tour from cava to Ribera del Duero in its £90 12-bottle special offer case. Phone 020-7286 0678 or email merchant@moreno-wines.co.uk for details and order by Sunday evening (December 20) for pre-Christmas delivery at just £5.

If you prefer to support local industry, Bookers Vineyard in Sussex will take orders until midnight on Monday. The 2009 Autumn Spice dry white (£9) is, its makers say, "the best ever", or a voucher for the excellent vineyard tour (from £20 for two) makes a great present. See www.bookersvineyard.co.uk.

Dream rather than drink, and plan to

visit the vineyards. Wine writer Wink Lorch has lined up an expert list of contributors at www.winetravelguides.com, offering detailed insider information on where to go, what to taste, good places to stay and eat, and much more. Fifty French, Italian and Spanish wine regions from Alsace to Siena are there already, with more to come in 2010.

The guides can now be consulted free on-line, but to get the full, up-to-date benefit buy a gift gold membership, which allows pdf downloads of all the guides for a year. Normal price is £29, but for Ham&High readers it's only £20 – on the gift page, enter promotional code D2HH1209. If you're buying it as a gift, the membership voucher can go directly to the recipient, or be sent to you for forwarding. The offer is valid until January 11 2010.

Finally, if you're stuck for a different seasonal party game, or an idea for wine-buff friends, try The Tasting Game, £20 from www.winegiftcentre.com, which offers a host of other suggestions from the sensible – tasting glasses, £15 for six – to the whackiest – blue champagne socks, £5. Order by next Monday, or Tuesday using the express option.

Tomorrow (Friday) is deadline day for Christmas deliveries from Jeroboams in Heath Street, Hampstead – and if you order by then there's a 15 per cent case discount.

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HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

When drilling a tile, you can prevent it from cracking by sticking a piece of masking tape or sticky tape over the area where you are going to drill before you start. This will also help to keep any potential chips from the tile from flying out.

www.urbansolutions.co.uk 020-7435 1111