

JUST another night in Camden Town, then. Here it all is: the lit-up Lock, the tottering and glittery Stables, the lit-up louts, the tottering and glittery birds. A waft of crepes and sickly chocolate thickly overlaid by the choke of wonky and hand-dipped candles, the rasp of joss stick, the sweetest whiff of Class B drugs. Here is the magnet for the youth of the world, summoned in their sullen droves to this Mecca of indolence and hand-me-down glamour by the siren call of Goth and vampire, stiff zipped biker jackets so much more pungent than the donor cows, Batik bedspreads crucified on a wall and punky studded cuffs and collars, all amid a welter of booze and unspeakable kebab, fairy lights twinklingly refracted from the colourful puddles of resultant spew. In short, the very bowels of hell.

If, that is, you ain't no kid. You can, though, just about get away with being down here and dirty if you are able to convince your foolish self that still you are young in spirit. Like me and old Gilgamesh, for instance. You've heard of him? Mesopotamian king from around 2700 BC, also known as Bilgames who, I'm fairly sure, about 4,500 years later went on to found Microsoft. We seem to have so much in common: he was two parts god, one part man, standing 11 cubits tall (around the 20ft mark). And his very name translates from the Sumerian – please bear with me, this is a loose translation, my Sumerian these days having become a tad rusty – as The Divine Old One Who Is Youthful. Spooky, no?

And so it came to pass that I, clad in the carapace of such rickety armour, with my wife and a brace of cousins, Angela and Robert Linger (a stalwart of the Heath and Hampstead Society), bowled on down there to experience the carnival that is dinner in this awesome and reasonably terrifying monument built in tribute to the great Gilgamesh. Robert was driving and doing his level best to cope with the nightmare of Chalk Farm Road – jammed with abandoned roadworks, rammed with knots of loitering lads so well up for it, so much needing to have it large, each of them

Bowed down in awe at the altar of Gilgamesh

Joseph Connolly's jaw drops at the huge bronze and wood-encrusted restaurant in Stables Market and its kaleidoscopic crazy menu

goggle-eyed from the cool potential of the coming night, not to say 11 pints of Stella. You have to do a U-turn and then you find yourself in a fairly alarming and arc-lit slip road that curves on up into Morrisons' car park and then you get out of the car and feel rather stupid because you're not really sure quite where to go next. Before you stands an uplift and rather fine red brick Victorian pile that's actually a dead ringer for the Uffizi in Florence, but that's not it, that's not Gilgamesh – and even our eponymous hero had the same sort of problem, you know, because in the ancient Iraqi poem The Epic Of Gilgamesh, he was told by a god: "Gilgamesh – what you seek you shall never find". Bad enough to be lost in Mesopotamia, you'd have thought – but in Camden it could be catastrophic.

It turns out to be a white and curvy structure, with its name illegible in deep blue lights above the vast and glassy entrance. Then you walk in and it hits you – then you see it: a jaw-dropping dome – part arena, part hangar, part megalomaniac Bond villain's subterranean asylum, and all as envisioned by Walt Disney on a woeeful night when he sucked down too much helium. Every soaring surface is encrusted with bronze and dark wood Babylonian carvings – the bar is like an ice rink and roughly the



Holy cow, Joseph is mesmerised by Gilgamesh.

size of Hendon. Palm trees tower, little red and blue lights studded into the floor ensure that you trip over and nearly kill yourself at every single opportunity – and all around you is a heaving sea of happy young people, scoffing, loud and laughingly flirty. You feel you could be on a liner, until a bloody great train thunders past the curtain window; I shouldn't be surprised to learn that there's an airport on the roof. Tables are sort of Indian-Babylonian and inlaid in brass – chairs some other crazy Egyptian Pharaoh Babylonian kind of thing, with bouncy flock upholstery. Still – can't babble on about Babylon Babel on so bright a day.

Ian Pengeley of XO fame is the chef here (along with 17 others) and the a la carte in this Pan-Asian Hamley's is as kaleidoscopic and nuts as everything around you: maybe safer to go for the tasting menus...? Forty-five pounds and £55, they are – per person. So for four, that's 200 quid before you've got a drink down you, and God knows what we'd be eating anyway. Took an age to decide – six times I told the delightful waitress to come back in a couple of minutes. So eventually: miso soup for the missus, steamed scallop and prawn dim sum for Angela – she enjoyed them (they looked like little hot cubic Mr

FACTFILE

- **GILGAMESH**
The Stables Market
Chalk Farm Road, NW1
Tel: 020-7482 5757
- Open for lunch and dinner seven days a week, noon to midnight.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- Cost: Tricky, this: there are often special offers. Dim sum lunch £10. Tasting menu for two £90 and £110. A la carte about £120 for three courses for two, with wine

Kipling fancies). For Robert, the rather endearingly named son-in-law eggs (there probably is one mother-in-law of a joke in there somewhere, but I'm blown if I can't think of it). Fried, these are, but in plump and yielding balls with chilli jam and coriander. "Very moreish," he said. "Eggs like I've never ever had them." And I was coping with sticky pork ribs – plentiful, tender as blazes, the black bean sauce finger lickin' good. Then came the deluge of mains: three large and pink schichimi lamb cutlets with Japanese croquette, a huge and equally pink hoba miso sea bass, steamed in leaves with a sweet plum sauce ("good, good, good," said Robert) while I had decent sliced beef fillet on a bed of green mash – too well done though, as was my wife's duck with pancakes: not crispy either, as was billed. As sides there were pak choi with excellent crunchiness asparagus tips and Gilgamesh fried rice (prawns, crab, pork, peas and spring onion). All was generous, all was enjoyed, and all too contributed to that Pan-Asian tingle on the palate that even the disappointing but well-chilled Cote de Provence rose failed to extinguish. As did the oddly flat

and dull bottled water: Fiji Artesia ('Untouched By Man Until You Drink It', it says; Lord knows what Woman's been up to, though: maybe best not to ask). Then there was a pleasingly gooey milk chocolate fondant and a green tea banana cake with toffee and coconut ice cream which my wife thought was fab.

The Gents, several miles and two staircases away, is a cross between Indiana Jones's Temple of Doom and the Lost City of Petra – comically let down by its toiletries: Lynx and Nivea, for the love of all that's holy. This bold, rumbustious and, though expensive, actually rather terrific place was packed – 300 covers, said the manager: 500 at weekends. The waitress who served the food was far better than the waiter who sometimes did and often didn't deal with the drinks. I said to her: "You are a delight!" and she said "You have made me very happy. My name is Sevda and I am coming from Turkey" and I said to her "Sevda, you are a Turkish delight!" And that was that, really.

As Robert nosed the car through the frisky and even denser throngs, I was reminded of a chunk in the epic poem about Gilgamesh's chum Enkidu (not actually a Tellytubby, an easy mistake) and I quote it here: "And so the harlot, Shamhat, showed him her breasts. The hairy bodied man came over and lay down on her and she showed him things a woman knows how to do. And then Enkidu went to seek the company of creatures. Seeing him, they fled".

Just another night in Camden Town, then.

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

The way forward after centuries of excess

TO START the new wine year, some rather sober thoughts: very definitely, there's nothing new in overdoing the alcohol intake, especially among the young.

Read contemporary accounts of the 18th century Englishmen (always men then, of course) released from parental control on the Grand Tour of Europe, ostensibly to better their knowledge of art and culture. What did they do?

"To the tavern again, where they get very drunk, and where they either quarrel among themselves, or sally forth, commit some riot in the streets, and are taken up by the watch." Or "to take punch... at the inns; to speak ill of all the other nations, and to boast without ceasing of their own".

But their reluctant hosts can't be too smug. On holiday in furthest Brittany last autumn, I came across an exhibition on wine history in the region. Hardly



The first lesson in drunkenness, 1837.

Picture courtesy of Ville de Landerneuc

a likely topic, but the fascinating display proved my scepticism entirely wrong: wine imports in Roman times, very considerable local wine production in the Middle Ages (prompted by many thirsty monastic communities), an important trading role again from the 17th century, and – back to the point – massive public drunkenness as the 19th century progressed towards the 20th.

At marriages and baptisms, fairs and markets, even weekly masses, participants were seen to have enjoyed themselves only if they were so drunk they'd lost all

sense of reason. And that meant whole families, children included. "Far from being marginal, public drunkenness in lower Brittany was a normal way of life, tolerated and approved by the rural community."

One celebrated 19th century text describes the initiation of a boy into manhood, the new clothes accompanied by a lesson in tasting alcohol – and the insistence on drinking it, to discover whether his drunkenness would prove a happy dream or a nightmare, thus indicating whether his character was good or bad.

The only bright light was that wine was seen as very much the lesser evil, compared to devilish spirits.

So, 21st century seasonal festivities over, what's the way forward in enjoying wine, without the excess? Apart from the ever-sensible drink in moderation advice, do read the alcohol percentage figure that there has to be on every bottle. There's a growing move away from blockbuster levels: the wine often tastes much better, anyway.

Also, technological means of reducing alcohol without destroying taste are improving. I'm totally clear headed after two glasses of Natureo (Soho Wine Suppliers, £6), from the very good Spanish wine producer Torres. It can't be called wine – at just 0.5 per cent alcohol, that's ruled out. But it convinced my companion, ignorant of what it was. I found it rather too aromatic, in an almost incensey way, though clean and fresh. I'd

prefer a much smaller quantity of single-figure alcohol German riesling...

□ At the end of a column with such an anti-alcohol emphasis, it seems all wrong to recommend wine bargains. But this is the season of bin-end sales and certainly there are bargains to be had – just consume them sensibly! They vanish too quickly to be listed here, but certain principles apply. Buy only from a seller you

know and trust and try to work out why particular wines are discounted. If it's simply from overstocking, or the need to clear out one vintage to allow in the next, that should be fine – though some of the bottles may need to be finished off soon. But as in any sale, beware "too-good-to-miss" opportunities offering something you don't know and may find you won't like.

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HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

□ If you're replacing a washer, always take the old one with you to the merchants as there are loads of different sizes to choose from.

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