

Voila, this is what a proper French bistro should be like

BORIS Johnson was in the back of our cab. Two Boris Johnsons. Well four, actually, if it's accuracy we're seeking. Not lookalikes, no, but a pair of pictures of a pair of Boris Johnsons on the underside of the flip-up seats. Here were the familiar little black pebble eyes set into the familiar expression – an expert blend of wisdom and confusion – and crowned by the Worzel Gummidge thatch that the Tory high-ups have done nothing to tame: and all this in stereo. It was an advert for Madame Tussaud's, with our lordly Mayor standing next to his waxwork. The two were startlingly indistinguishable, though neither, of course, seemed remotely real.

I haven't been to Madame Tussaud's since I was young and impressionable (so a bloody long time, then) and even then I was less than overwhelmed. The Chamber of Horrors failed to horrify, and my heroes – then as now P.G. Wodehouse and The Beatles – to my eye more resembled, respectively, President Eisenhower and Herman's Hermits. These days, apparently, there are effigies of the truly awe-inspiring immortals such as Kylie Minogue and Jonathan Ross, along with a clutch of currently favoured thin young women, wholly interchangeable. And yet still, I noticed as we sped on by, there coils around the building that dutiful and bedraggled queue of damp young tourists looking resignedly beaten down, in that international subfusc uniform of ecru and khaki crumpledness, imperceptibly shuffling forward in the drizzle, inching slowly closer to their goal of parting with a goodly proportion of dole and student loan in return for the opportunity to gurn for a photo while getting chummy with a lifelike candle. Well – as Madame Tussaud herself might have put it – chacun a son gout. My particular gout is rather more literal and runs to food and drink: why else do you think we were down here?

Galvin Bistrot de Luxe is one

Joseph Connolly thoroughly enjoys being Galvinised at this Baker Street restaurant

of three highly successful restaurants in London, the fiefdom of the eponymous Galvin brothers, Chris and Jeff. Recently opened is Galvin La Chapelle in Spitalfields, though the whole thing got going with Galvin at Windows, the restaurant on the very top floor of the Hilton Park Lane, achieving the near impossible in making this slightly ludicrous 1960s behemoth sort of fashionable again. My wife, though – rather prone to vertigo – says she'll never go up there because she'd spend the first course screaming, the entrée brimming with nausea, though still not quite peaking until pudding, when she would pass out on the floor. But in Baker Street we are safely on terra firma – and the warm and Gallic welcome (a contradiction, you'd think) is immediate and seemingly heartfelt. What we have here is not an exact translation of the best sort of Parisian bistro of legend (and often imagination) but more a careful approximation, a slightly anglicized and very faintly parodic rendering that yet comes across as utterly authentic.

So let's just tick off all the essential elements: dark wood panelling beneath a high and corniced ceiling punctuated by revolving fans and globular pendants of opaque glass. Thonet bentwood chairs and leather banquettes, simple napery, an art nouveau menu, waiters and waitresses in black with long and proper white aprons – and just over there in the corner, stroked by a pair of prostitutes, there crouches the diminutive figure of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec,



sketching. This last bit being a lie, mais naturellement.

The menu is longish and traditionally French; I was able to cope with the waitress's news that this lunchtime, alas, there were to be no roast veal brains. Quelle dommage: not. If you peer very closely, there is a set three course lunch at the very bottom of the menu – amazing value at £15.50, but limited in choice. So from the a la carte, my wife went for a veloute of pumpkin and parmesan with roasted ceps, while I was having half-a-dozen escargots. The soup was poured with a flourish from a boat on to and around the cheese and mushrooms, and was much adored: this mellow orange bowlful, she said, "tasted like the colour: warm and fragrant – sunshine in the winter" – which, if you ask me, is worthy of Proust. Probably. My snails were very good too – proper earthy, slightly dirty flavour and chewy enough (all this is a good thing) the garlic not too overpowering. We had a Languedoc from the

Vins de Saison list. This is offered in a "Pot Lyonnais" – a little pichet which, it says on the menu, "is the right amount to satisfy the thirst of a mature and experienced man" and so I – being callow and raw – ordered a whole bottle, and jolly good it was. The head waiter – affable fellow – is from Bordeaux, but in London he always drinks Languedoc for reasons of value and quality: a lot of us in restaurants have twigged to this play.

Then I had beef bavette with macaroni gratin and a sauce Bordelaise. Also, hoggishly, pommes puree. This cut of beef isn't much seen here – it's flank (skirt) which needs very careful butchery to rid it of all the horrid bits. This was exemplary – tender, rareish, deeply flavoured and plentiful (I've had mean little portions in Paris that tasted of jackboot). The intensity of the Bordelaise was a perfect complement (in addition to the red wine and shallot, there may have been marrow going on).

The cake of stacked penne, bonded by gooey strings of cheese, was again the ideal pairing, the nursery comfort of the pommes puree indecently creamy. My wife, meanwhile, was very happily carving her way through a supreme of Landaise chicken with roast salsify, curly kale and Albufera sauce. This had a very good base of chicken veloute, though it was thought that the essential crème fraiche was maybe over abundant: here was richness in the true old French style. Of the salsify she said "it's rather like asparagus, but without the flavour. But it doesn't actually interfere..."

The place was packed with couples, parties of four and then whole families – the bloke at the table next door had just gone off to talk to the chef about the cassoulet (it's that sort of restaurant) and everyone was having a whale of a time. And also eating puddings. So let's do that, then: I nearly ordered a crème brulee, but then I saw it

FACTFILE

- ☐ **GALVIN BISTROT DE LUXE**, 66 Baker Street, W1. Tel: 020-7935 4007
- ☐ **Open:** Lunch: Mon-Sat noon-2.30pm. Sun noon-3.30pm. Dinner: Mon-Wed 6pm-10.30pm, Thu-Sat 6pm-11pm. Sun 6pm-9.30pm
- ☐ **Food:** ★★★★★★☆☆
- ☐ **Service:** ★★★★★★☆☆
- ☐ **Cost:** Set three-course lunch £15.50. Three-course lunch for two with wine around £100

had in it blackberries and mulled wine. I simply can't remember the last time I saw an unadulterated crème brulee on a menu: it's perfect as it is – leave it alone. So I had instead a raspberry souffle with raspberry ripple ice cream, while my wife, being infinitely more sensible, went for the lightness of Oeuf a la Neige with praline rose. This fluffy egg white thing was pretty and carefree, studded with bubblegum pink bits which turned out to be Disneyfied almonds. My souffle was a moussy delight, the raspberry flavour so very true; the ice cream, though, tasted more of vanilla than anything.

This is an excellent spot for a relaxed and superior bistro meal: you will afterwards feel very happy to have been Galvinised. The rain was heavier when we emerged, though still it was there – that endless straggling line of sodden youths in the queue for Madame Tussaud's: they looked to be the very same ones as before – but then they rather tend to, don't they? But what on earth can the strength of the attraction be? There isn't even a model of me in there, you know – which is bewildering, quite frankly. Am I not, after all, a legend in my own lunchtime?

☐ *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.*

that has really got the competition in a fizz

Challenges one and two were the easy ones. "But the name and the label took another six months," Kennedy admits. The eureka moment was finding Griffith Park mentioned in a magazine article: it is the home of Los Angeles zoo (hence the animals which gave the required wow factor to the label) and also a famed film location, while linking neatly with South Australia's Griffith winelands, home of the fizz.

The initial wine was pink, attractively strawberry-fruited but dry and moreish. Just before

Christmas 2007, towards the end of Morrisons' initial six-month exclusive deal, it struck Effervescents gold. The wine was on promotion at £5, televised

recommendations

came from Delia Smith and Jilly Goolden, "the media went crazy". Sixteen thousand cases flew off the shelves in ten days, frustrated customers traced Kennedy's mobile number and demanded more...

More awards came, availability widened, a white (Griffith Park brut,

fresh, gently lemony) was introduced – and that was the wine which wowed the Which? tasters, just before Christmas 2009. Perfect timing for more publicity.

But none of this would be worth reporting unless the wine

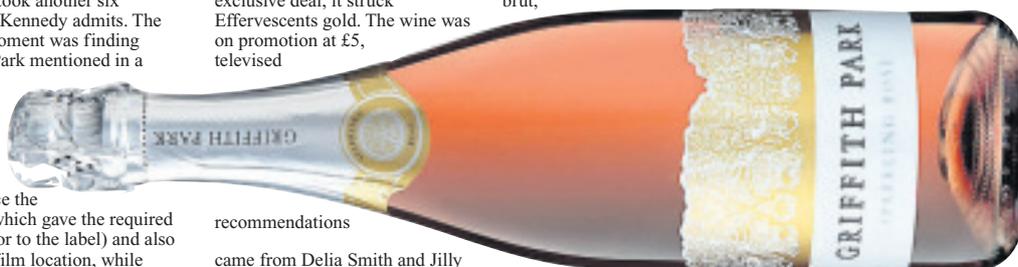
deserved its high profile. Griffith Park is made like champagne, though after the second fermentation there's a transfer into tank and it is rebottled. For

£7 wines, both brut and pink are remarkably stylish: lovely fine, persistent bubbles, clean and characterful flavours. Both are in Morrisons and Asda.

Kennedy's mission is simple:

"To give people quality for a very good price." Many glasses of Griffith Park should be raised to that.

LIZ SAGUES



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