

THERE are many abiding and quite baffling mysteries in the world of London restaurants, and I add to the list of them daily. A random sample: why do so many very average and overpriced gastropubs continue to prosper, while far finer places roll over and die? Why do greeters so often seem just thoroughly displeased to see you? Why are all banquettes a good two inches lower than the chairs set opposite them? Why do we still tolerate the 'cover charge' when laundry is an overhead that should surely be absorbed? Why is Jamie Oliver? Why did all the horrible butchers' debris and unspeakable innards and trimmings become the Capital's trendiest food? Why, when you order pudding, do waiters ask if you want coffee after when the right time to ask is after? All these niggles, though, are as nothing when compared with the biggest mystery of all – the riddle that has no resolution in reason: why – given the scope and allure of London's glittering apron spread out before him – did the much esteemed Rowley Leigh (of Kensington Place fame) elect to open his extremely spiffy flagship restaurant on the topmost and eerily abandoned floor of Whiteley's shopping centre in the middle of Bayswater? (The satellite mystery being, of course, why he decided to call the thing Le Café Anglais when it is neither a café nor Anglais, and why, anyway, it had to be said in bloody French in the first place: but let it lie).

Bayswater is curious – stranded between all sorts of areas that have an identity, but in itself nothing you can remotely put a finger on. Queensway is just one long line of tawdry souvenir shops (Union Jacks on everything from teapots to sex aids) – catering I suppose to the herds of foreign youths with backpacks that buff you who swell all the cut-price tenement hotels around here. And then there is Whiteley's: a rather fine building dating from 1911, though the history is older than that. Whiteley's, indeed, was London's very first department store – opened in 1883, ages before Selfridges or Harrods. In

Sad demise of store but the food is still all White

Joseph Connolly visits Rowley Leigh's flagship restaurant at the top of the deserted Whiteley's shopping centre, which was made famous in Pygmalion

Pygmalion, Professor Higgins sent Eliza Doolittle to Whiteley's "to be attired". Any glamour is long gone now, though – as becomes so clear if you approach Le Café Anglais not from the street entrance but via the three-floored shopping centre and see for yourself the beautiful marble floors, the sweeping staircase of old... and the total blandness and emptiness of it all: no people, no pizzazz. There is a decent set-up on the ground floor called Food Inc which sells fresh meat and fish and gorgeously packaged luxury items (at luxury prices). And then there are the usual rag trade outlets – Boots, a small M&S... on the first floor a Books Etc was in the final awful throes of closing down, and opposite that was the already boarded-up World of Feng Shui (which doubtless had been wrongly sited).

And then, very weirdly, there's Le Café Anglais – hard by another Café, this one Rouge, outside which a very old man, his coffee cup long since drained, was glowering hard at page three of The Sun. Then an acre of empty tables and an equally old woman with her eyes resignedly closed (maybe Professor Higgins had sent her to Whiteley's to be tired). Even the restaurant itself – a huge and beautiful space lit by tall leaded windows and fine and cubic art deco lanterns – was practically empty: maybe just eight or nine tables taken out of simply scores. The greeting was lovely, though – very smart and professional staff here – and the

tables are well tricked out with bread in a silver bowl, and a dinky plate of radishes shaped like miniature marrows.

My guest was a universally well-known face in the book world, and a highly respected figure – Mark Le Fanu, who has by his own estimation been head of the Society of Authors for about a hundred years. Mark is a very nice fellow indeed – quintessentially English, wise and terminally modest – quite discreet too about his army of friends and connections and the power he can and does so subtly wield for the good of us poor and downtrodden scribblers. Actually, there used to be an old monthly lunching society called Scribblers – Mark and I were members of that: many long and foody Fridays in the Chelsea Arts Club were very happily frittered.

The menu is large, seductive and expensive. There is a set lunch, though – £16.50 for two courses, £19.50 for three – and that's the way we went. Mark ordered braised cuttlefish – on the grounds that he had never before eaten cuttlefish – with cocoa beans, ink and ravioli. This was good, the blackish ink (not Quink, I think) absorbed by the beans to form a flavoursome base for the quite chewy cuttlefish (somewhere between octopus, squid and eraser, really). I had cold pork and Iberico lardon with pickled girolles and artichoke. This was very pinkly and prettily laid out in a series of flowery curls – and I know that lardon is meant to be fatty, but it was rather



too fatty; and I know that pickled things are meant to be briny, but the mushrooms were rather too briny. My main was altogether better – a thick and very fresh tranche of roasted cod with braised endive and beurre rouge. The fish was excellent and glossy and actually had flavour – which, with cod, is always something of a surprise. The beurre rouge formed a puddle of scarlet – a bit like melted plum jam, and none the worse for that. The red Puglia we were drinking (a bargain at £17.50) was fine with it (generally, I don't at all mind red with fish – although I would draw the line at Dover sole, say, which pleads for a Meursault or something equally fine and bankrupting). Mark very much

enjoyed his civet of pheasant, although neither of us was quite sure of its nature or pronunciation: cee-vay? Shee-vay? Or just plain civet – the African carnivore known for the secretion of milky fluid from its anal glands? No no, rest easy: nothing to do with that – just decent pieces of I would guess pot roasted pheasant on a good and gooey bed of lentils with something called 'mustard fruits': the boiled potatoes were surprisingly fine, for boiled potatoes.

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FACTFILE

- ☐ **LE CAFÉ ANGLAIS**, 8 Porchester Gardens, W2. Tel: 020-7221 1415
- ☐ Open Mon-Sun 12.30pm-3.30pm. Mon-Thu 6.30pm-11.30pm. Fri and Sat 6.30pm-11.30pm. Sun 6.30pm-10.15pm
- ☐ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- ☐ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- ☐ Cost: Set lunch £16.50 for two courses, £19.50 for three. A la carte and dinner rather a lot more.

don't mind having a pudding if you're having a pudding and I said well I don't have to have a pudding and I don't want to force you to have a pudding and Mark said he wouldn't then have a pudding if I wasn't having a pudding and I said well I will of course if you're having a pudding and Mark said well okay I'll have a pudding then: but only if you're having one.

So: a splendid triangle of passion fruit mousse with mango for him: apricot in colour with a livid orange jellyish topping – intense, creamy, first rate. I went the Bunter route with a mound of chocolate sponge in a moat of chocolate sauce: the actual pudding a tinge on the dry side and a bit too unsweet, the warmish sauce as lovely as you want.

Mark then had to dash – and so alone I wandered back through the echoing precinct. In its heyday, you know, Whiteley's looked like transparent slices of peach, tasted of Colman's. The boiled potatoes were surprisingly fine, for boiled potatoes. Mark said he wasn't having a pudding and I said oh I was going to have a pudding but I won't then if you're not having a pudding and Mark said well I

☐ All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk

Delicious wines for couples to fall in love with

THIS may seem a little premature: romantic suggestions with 10 days still to go. But there's good reason, for if you don't act soon it will be too late.

Pink, as far as wine goes, is certainly what's top of the Valentine list. But let's think laterally, and reach pink by mixing red and white.

That's the line the people at Pampas Plains have chosen, quite reasonably as Argentina is hardly known for its pinks – more for bold reds, which are a bit less romantic. So their Cupid package is white fizz – Alamos Brut – plus what this web operation is all about, juicy red Argentine beef.

It began when owner Malcolm Harris, back in the UK after five years working in Argentina, suffered "beef withdrawal" symptoms. "I'd probably eaten it once a day every day all that time," he

acknowledges.

To cut a long business plan short, he sourced fine meat from Argentina's rich

grasslands and began selling it online.

In the seven years since the business began, the emphasis has moved from restaurants to consumer sales, and wine has been added, under the expert palate of Master of Wine Giles Arbuthnot. "It's the natural complement to the meat," says Harris, enthusing about the perfect balance between Argentina's beef and its winemakers' respected malbecs and cabernets.

But fillet steak and fizz? It works, he insists. I haven't tasted the Alamos,

but my experience of Argentine fizz in the past has been pretty positive. This one is made by the

(Feb 10) does include two pinks, a champagne (Forget-Chemin, £30) and a Reully from the Loire (Valery Renaudat, £13).

But there are more whites and reds, especially stylish modern dry riesling from Germany, in which this eclectic

and very good wine shop specialises (Walter 2009, £10, and Veldenzer Kirchberg 2008, Martin Conrad, £18.50). And alongside classic reds is a temptingly unusual bottle from the heel of Italy's boot, the Puglian Nerio 204 from Schola Sarmanti (£14). To book tickets (limited numbers), phone 020-7286 6475.

But pink sales continue to soar, though more – sadly – for the deep-coloured boiled-sweet-

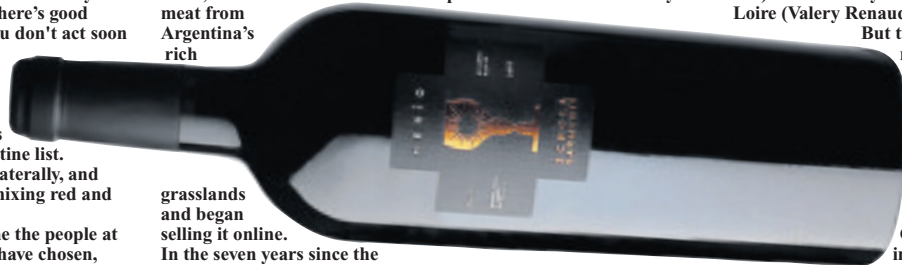
flavoured end of the market than for the pale, dry, fragrant food-friendly bottles from Provence (you can tell where my preference lies).

But I came across one the other day which is fruity enough to suit a lot of tastes, yet also elegantly restrained. You've still time to order Domaine Eric Louis Sancerre rose La Cote Blanche 2008, delicate and deliciously lingering (www.bibendum-wine.co.uk, £13). And even during this chilly

spell, I've enjoyed drinking the refreshing Louis Jadot beajoulais rose 2008 (Waitrose, £9) – it's a fine aperitif, and excellent with food even as rich as roast belly pork.

And a final romantic red recommendation back at Bibendum: the fragrant, stylishly quaffable Les Nuages pinot noir St Pourcain 2007 (£7.20), rivaling light burgundy at half the price.

Have a lovely time...
LIZ SAGUES



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HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

☐ If you've got sliding sash windows, then you'll know that they sometimes stick when opening or closing. Simply rub a candle up through the grooves that the windows run in and the wax will help ease them along.

www.urbansolutions.co.uk 020-7435 1111