

# Give that man a cigar!

Introduced to his first sophisticated smoke by writer Roald Dahl, **Joseph Connolly** rediscovers the pleasure at Marylebone's latest bijou hotel which boasts a splendid terrace specially dedicated to the art

**T**HIS, gosh, is my 50th restaurant review for the Ham&High, so I'd say I deserve a cigar. The very first I ever smoked was with Roald Dahl: I was 15 years old. He was the uncle of a schoolchum of mine, and I sat there with this fine Havana (and vintage port) in his farmhouse in Great Missenden, awed to be in the presence of a writer I so hugely admired – though largely for his offbeat and sadistic adult short stories rather than any of the children's stuff. Dahl had no truck with youngsters behaving in anything other than an able and grown-up manner, and hence the blithely proffered alcohol and nicotine; I daresay had there been easily to hand a hookah of opium and a bevy of painted floosies, he would cheerfully have ushered them on.

The point is, I did not do what a chap is traditionally meant to do, when first he sucks upon a powerful stogey: I did not go green, feel queasy, get a headache or have my eyes stung – I simply enjoyed it enormously. Accordingly, in the school holidays I marched into a tobacconists (there were such things then) and asked for 'cigars'. "What cigars you want ...?" asked the man, with suspicion. "Dunno. Brown ones. Got five shillings." I ended up with a tiny tin of Tom Thumb, each little whiff the size of a nail and perfectly horrid. Binned them. Then I was a pipe smoker for about a hundred years before dumping that and rekindling my oh-so-brief but indelible cigar flirtation. These days I smoke rather few, but I was pleased to be asked to a tasting of a new one at this recently opened bijou hotel in Marylebone, name of 10 Manchester Street (and you'll never begin to guess their address). This place was launched at 10am on the 10th day of the 10th month of ... 2009 (what's wrong with them at all? They couldn't have waited a year ...?) and is one of a couple of dozen in a new and rapidly flourishing chain called 'Bespoke Hotels', this one the holder of five stars for luxury. Behind the very discreet frontage there lurks a warm and personal welcome, in the style of a private town house. An elegant marble foyer with



A match made in heaven ...  
Joseph Connolly.

quirkily extravagant furniture (rather in the manner of a Malmaison hotel) and – ooh my goodness! Seated at an Empire table is a strikingly beautiful receptionist. Just look at her, will you ...? Amazing, don't you think? She directed me gorgeously to this hotel's USP: the best designed and most comfortable cigar terrace I have ever experienced. Because you know about the crazy laws, these days – don't get me on to all that. Anyway, this terrace adheres to

all of them, and yet one is hardly aware of being outside at all. There is a strip-wood sloping ceiling, a long wall of attractive aluminium interlocking mesh, backed by evergreens, and at each of the compulsorily open ends, dense container planting of conical topiary box. Black rattan chairs and sofas with deep red cushions, five enormous and powerful heaters and proper crystal cigar ashtrays all combine in a stylish and suitably dramatic tableau – while a fantastic range

## FACTFILE

- 10 Manchester Street (guess where?), Marylebone, W1  
Tel: 0870 111 1627
- Dining area open all day. But it's the Cigar Terrace that's really the thing.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Cost: individual dishes from around £8. But about £130 for three courses for two with wine.

of cigars is displayed in the custom-built walnut and glass walk-in humidifier. Crumbs. This really is a very cool hotel. You want proof? They play blues in the loos.

My host was Simon Chase, who has long been the respected and much-liked public face of Hunters & Frankau, importers of fine cigars since 1790 – and the very first thing he told me was this: there is a French magazine, see, called L'Amateur de Cigare, and only two Englishmen have ever appeared on its cover – the great St Terence of Conran ... and little me! Well I'll be jiggered. The rather superb cigar we had all come to savour (what else can I do but give it a puff?) was a limited edition Romeo Y Julieta made of extra-aged leaf – as fat as a broomstick, though not quite so long. It drew most beautifully and was a perfect match – you might find it odd – for a Bruno Paillard NV champagne, this being a rather baked and toasty bubbly. And what sort of fellow attends such an event, would you say? All looking like Churchill or Robert Morley or maybe Sir Lew Grade? Not a bit of it: there were about 18 blokes, mostly in their 20s and 30s, all dressed down to the point of parody – many of them members of an Internet 'cigar forum' (I know) and seemingly having a whale of a time. But

This was a 6.30 event, and now it's eight o'clock: so where's the grub? Hey? Well there wasn't any, so Simon and I sloped next door into the eating bit to put that right.

The dining area is very small – generous for a bar, but tight for a restaurant. The taupe slub walls and very handsome black japanned fretwork are set off by gently baroque velvet-covered sofas ... and these you are actually meant to sit on, while the table hovers quite tantalisingly a good yard in front of you, and roughly on a par with the bridge of your nose. Many cushions were mustered, and soon I was bouncing high on my very own booster seat, and surveying a menu. There are all-day delights such as Eggs Benedict, steaks and so on, but we plumped for traditional starters – for Simon, the not very appealingly entitled 'Spanish meat plate' which turned out to be good, thin and lean Serrano ham fanned out on a sheet of slate with a tiny Kilner jar, jammed with those small green olives, cutely stuffed with pimiento. I had a similar thing – more Serrano ham, but with sweet and yielding grilled red peppers and a reasonable green salad. Simon had ordered wild mushroom risotto with parmesan for his main – a rather small mound in a huge white bowl, though still I nicked a bit: good, intense mushroom infusion, though it could have been creamier. While he got himself around all that I had left him, he told me of an auction he had once conducted in Havana: fine humidors of choice Cohibas, signed by Fidel Castro. As the first was knocked down for half-a-million dollars, Simon was surprised to find Il Presidente coming towards him. "You speak English?" grunted Castro (in English). "Not a lot ..." replied Simon, he knows not why. "Ah,"

said Castro. "Ah!" I was enjoying a pan-fried breast of organic chicken in a good and deep langouste sauce, all on a bed of rather too oily beetroot rosti. And we both were enjoying a sumptuous St Emilion: Chateau Viramieure 2004. "I don't drink on Mondays and Wednesdays, you know," said Simon airily, while sipping appreciatively. "Do you not? I see. Um ... it's Monday, Simon." He continued to sip appreciatively. "Is it ...? Is it really?"

We passed on pudding – even the selection of six ice creams for a tinner, including Very Vanilla, Strawberry Tease and, er – Hokey Pokey. What Simon had instead – he had to, he said, because it's called Chase, look, and I'm called Chase, you see – was a rhubarb liqueur. I'll say that once again for you, shall I? A rhubarb liqueur. From Hereford. "It smells ..." I opined, smelling it, "... damp." Simon had a sniff. "Mm," he agreed. "Well Hereford is, of course ..." That it was vile, goes without saying.

And so after a smallish digestif Ramon Allones (that's a cigar back on the terrace, we both were poised upon taking our leave of this very sophisticated though predictably pricey hotel. And it was then that I was felled to discover that in the foyer ... can it really be so? The strikingly beautiful receptionist was there no longer! Oh dear – I am undone. Well ... stiff upper lip, I suppose – buckle down and remember the immortal words of Kipling: "a woman is only a woman, but a good cigar is a Smoke".

□ *Joseph Connolly's latest book is **Faber And Faber: Eighty Years Of Book Cover Design (Faber and Faber, £25). All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website [www.josephconnolly.co.uk](http://www.josephconnolly.co.uk).***

# Australian bunch are real charmers

**I**T WOULD be less than honest to fail to admit that wine writers rely quite considerably on public relations companies – for details of who sells which wines, photographs to illustrate articles, background information, and more.

Westbury Communications is one of the biggest in the wine PR business, with clients who include Oddbins and M&S as well as large-scale producers such as the excellent Plaimont co-operative in south-west France, source of fragrant value-for-money whites and food-friendly reds.

Now is the right moment to credit Westbury for being effectively proactive rather than simply reactive.

The other week, it organised a tasting of a generous selection of its clients' bottles, reinforced by a few contributions from other sources to balance the offering.

Not only was the day intelligently themed, but also all the wines opened are on sale in Britain.

Most are on the high street and

those which aren't can be found on-line. It was such a difference from a lot of the tastings I go to, which may have wonderful wines but you can't buy them here.

On this showing, the



rieslings met the challenge Westbury set: can Australian wines rebuild the popularity of this grape variety?

There were some very impressive examples and most – while showing off riesling's purity, acidity and all its other fine characteristics – were just a bit more approachable than the classic dry Germans (the next, and very rewarding, step).

The first star was Whirlpool Reach 2007, Tasmania (£10, Oddbins), a wine which made me feel I'd like to stop tasting there

and then and simply enjoy drinking what was in the glass.

Fortunately, I carried on, to more pleasures. Three from the

Clare Valley, each 2008 and again costing £10 – Jim Barry The Lodge (The Sampler), Knappstein (M&S), Leasingham Bin 7 (Ocado) – and then the wonderful Henschke Julius 2006, Eden Valley (£17, [www.winedirect.co.uk](http://www.winedirect.co.uk)). These are simply so much more adult wines than many popular Australian whites.

The three-continent pinot noirs, too, showed that the new can challenge the established and also reflect terroir in a way not

always expected of them (they came from North and South America and Australasia).

It was fascinating to see that M&S has three Kiwi pinots, all 2008 and all at £15, but with very different flavours and style. My choice

– perhaps an unfashionable one given that the other two wines come from hotspot Central Otago – is Te Muna from Martinborough, fragrant and ripe, with a final freshness despite 14 per cent alcohol.

But there are lots of Australasian charmers at lower prices (all 2008, all £10, in order of personal preference) Whirlpool Reach (Oddbins), Madfish Originals ([www.bibendum-wine.co.uk](http://www.bibendum-wine.co.uk)), Gulf Station

(Sainsbury's), Lobster Reef (Oddbins). Even cheaper 2008s, and as for California – the best yet still good, are M&S Tasmanian and Windy Peak (Sainsbury's) both £8. And the £17.50 for De Bortoli Yarra Valley Estate 2007 (Oddbins) is very well spent.

I've been an advocate of Chilean pinot for a while, but prices seem to be creeping up faster than quality (Ona 2008,

£10, Oddbins remains very good), and as for California – the best are very pricey (Brooks Janus 2006, £25, Stone, Vine & Sun [www.stonevine.co.uk](http://www.stonevine.co.uk)) and the rest don't tempt me.

There were three more themes, and there's no space left... But old world pinks and variations on the lighter-alcohol theme will surely find a place soon.

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**HOME TIP OF THE WEEK**

□ If a pipe has split and you can't find your stopcock or any isolation valves, wrap torn strips of fabric tightly around the break, put a bucket underneath and call a qualified plumber.

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