

Who do they think they are kidding?

If you want to find out how bad the Blitz was, try visiting a new restaurant where you can experience the worst of rationing and even an ear-splitting air raid, warns **Joseph Connolly**

I HAVE just been to a really corking new exhibition at the Imperial War Museum called The Ministry Of Food, all about the economics and ingenuity of war on the kitchen front, and highly recommended. Which makes all that follows somewhat serendipitous. During last year's work on Hampstead Tube station, when it was endlessly obscured by hazy green netting and scaffolding, I heard a whisper that in the upper parts of that oh-so-familiar and blood-tiled building a new bar and restaurant were being created. Then, as is always the way with reasonably exciting rumours, the trail went cold and I heard no more. Until a couple of weeks ago, when a press release arrived. Now normally, as I hope you know, I ignore such things, along with freebie invitations. Nor usually do I go to what are known in the trade as "soft openings" – a bit like previews in the theatre when a degree of fine tuning is still in progress (and prices, therefore, heavily reduced). But I thought I'd go to this one because the "concept" (there had to be a "concept": they used to be called "themes" but now they're called "concepts") sounded so utterly novel and nuts in equal measure – and also on account of their rather amazing opening offers exclusive to Ham&High readers (which I will fill you in on later). So upon your behalf, I took up the offer of an "exclusive dining

experience" amid a select if motley band. Blitz is as Blitz does. Here is the nearest you are going to get (should you want it) to wartime cooking in the 21st century. They say in the bumf that it's opening now because this year marks the 65th anniversary of the end of the Second World War and that, due to this recession, the time is ripe for the new austerity, blah blah blah ... But I think it's simply because the work took rather longer than expected, one whole year has elapsed and there's a bit of optimistic cashing in going on. Anyway: here's the set-up. To the side of the entrance to the Underground station is a tiny door that you've probably walked past a thousand times and never once noticed. In you go, up the stairs, then up more stairs ... and there it is: the virtual recreation of a wartime Lyons Corner House, down to the spongeable tablecloths, paper doilies, eau de nil woodwork, damned uncomfortable chairs and waitresses got up as Nippies with hairnets and order pads and pencils dangling from the waistband of their cute little pinnies. The walls are covered with brown-framed posters exhorting you to "Dig For Victory" and warning soberly that "Careless Talk Costs Lives". Vera Lynn warbles contentedly in the background, largely about Berkeley Square, the White Cliffs of Dover, and their concomitant

birds. But it's the menu that knocks you for six. You want examples? Dear Lord – where do I begin? Okay – let's begin with this: snoek. Ever heard of it? It is an unspeakable fish that I had hoped was extinct, but no – they've got shoals of it here. The British during the War were subject to many privations and inflictions: they barked at whale, but eventually embraced it. Snoek, though, proved a revulsion too far: the Ministry of Food couldn't give it away – and now, in 2010, here it is on a menu. Along with omelette ... made with powdered eggs. Spam fritters, but of course. Hotpot with no meat in it (don't we know there's a war on?). I gazed at the waitress to see if she could be serious ... and she smiled jammily, lipstickily back, while patting her perm: give her her due – she was up to her thinly-pencilled eyebrows in "concept", this girl. Rather dazed, I looked at the menu again ... and then I saw it. Ermine. Broiled. Come again ...? Ermine. Broiled. What does ermine make you think of? Yes – the strip of fur on the robe of a member of the House of Lords. But did you ever expect to have it for dinner? I think not. Because ermine is the euphemism for stoat ... so what we have here is basically roadkill. Not so much ermine, then, as vermin. Broiled. With carrots. So I ordered that. I had already not eaten a "Make-



I'll get my fin hat ... Joseph Connolly at Blitz.

do-and-mend prawn salad" which turned out to be lumps of chewy fish (bloody snoek, I shouldn't wonder) with flaccid lettuce dressed in tapwater. Also a slice of briny beetroot, bleeding. Very authentic. Not actually edible or anything, but very authentic. My wife said, "Can we go now, please?" – but I sternly reminded her of just two things: One, this was not the attitude that saw us through the War. Where was her Dunkirk Spirit? What would Churchill have said? What would Captain Mainwaring have said? And Two, she had ordered a powdered egg omelette which was doubtless on its way. And then suddenly it was before her – a thinnish, whitish thing, so far as the very dim lighting allowed. And the blackout, of course. Oh yes – did I mention that the windows were completely blacked out? I poked my stoat. It didn't actually move. It looked like ... rabbit, I suppose. Chicken, at a pinch. The potatoes were boiled to fragmentation, as was the ... I think it was cabbage. Might have been lawn clippings. The worst thing by far though was that there was no wine on offer, for God's sake ...!

Because wine in the 1940s the management deems to be "inappropriate". So what do we get to choke this stuff down with, then? A choice: PG Tips, Robinson's Barley Water, orange squash or (if you're really really good) a bottle of Bass, Mackeson or Guinness. And after, if you fancy an espresso or a tisane, forget it: there's Camp Coffee, Ovaltine ... and Horlicks. Until this moment, I never truly grasped how very terrible the War must have been. Now I hesitate to tell you this next bit, because you might think I'm just horsing around. Trust me: what happened was this – I dropped my forkful of stoat in open-mouthed terror, slammed both hands to my ears and screamed and screamed like a truly demented thing. The point is, nobody even heard me because an air raid siren was quite deafeningly wailing and wailing ...! The crockery on the table was bouncing up and down like billy-o and my wife had goggled at me once and now was hiding under the table, whimpering badly. And Jesus – it's not as if they gave the thing a single shrill blast from the delirious

FACTFILE
❑ **BLITZ**
50 Hampstead High Street
Tel: 020-5001 1410
❑ **Food:** ☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆
❑ **Service:** ☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆
(if only for the costumes)
❑ **Cost:** About ten bob. You don't even need any coupons.

fun of it ... it still was going, rising and lowering like a paralytic cow who'd overdone the hooch. Then the waitresses appeared with torches – a sudden phalanx of usherettes who roared at us not to panic and then handed everybody a card, which I now have before me, and quote for you verbatim: "Ladies and Gentlemen. Please do not concern yourselves. Blitz is the best equipped restaurant in London to deal with an air raid because we are in Hampstead and situated directly over the deepest Underground shaft in the Capital. In honoured tradition, we now shall proceed in an orderly fashion to the platforms below". Well enough was enough, I thought: sod this for a game of soldiers. I mimed to the girl that we were leaving, and that's what we hurriedly did. Many other couples were seemingly happy to be chivvied away, though – and as you can't use a lift during an "air raid", they had one hell of a bloody walk down the stairs ahead of them. Grief. Still – no-one said war was a picnic. Now ask yourself this: do you want to go to Blitz? Do you really? Really? Are you sure? Well okay, then – here are those opening offers I was talking about earlier, and may God have mercy on you. Until the end of the month – only if you book ahead and mention this Ham&High review – all meals and drinks are at wartime prices. Yes. So if you can stomach it, two of you should get out for around ten bob. Fifty pence. As for me, I'm still very jangled – not yet sure I can face another restaurant as long as I live. But for your sakes and your sakes only, I shall stoically endeavour to Keep Calm, and Carry On. ❑ All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

WITH a wry smile, Christian Cailleau acknowledges that the chateaux of Bordeaux don't have the most welcoming of reputations: "We're trying to change that, and it's happening." Over in Burgundy, even though smaller has meant friendlier, there's also a lot more being offered to visitors. "Wine tourism," says Veronique Beigenger, "is becoming tres sympa." And some of the enticements now for visitors are very different from a simple vineyard visit or cellar tasting. Celebrate the uncorking of Vin Jaune barrels in the Arbois wine villages, for example, sip champagne from illuminated flutes in a bar suspended in the treetops at the foot of the Montagne de Reims, visit a wine shop cum restaurant in a traditional barge moored on the Canal du Midi, picnic with the vigneron in Alsace. A year ago, the French government acknowledged the vital value of encouraging wider interest in its most famous agricultural product when it set up a Wine Tourism Council and, last



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month, the first national wine tourism awards were announced – the Jura wine route was one winner. Wine tourism just across the Channel has a lot going for it. Most places where grapes flourish are scenic – think of the chateaux-stuffed Loire Valley or the Cathar ruins perched vertiginously above Roussillon's squat bush vines. Where there's good wine, there

will always be good food. And in terms of souvenirs, what's better to open for friends than a wine you first tasted in its maker's cellar. Route des vins signs have long been a feature of French wine regions – but it's all so much better organised now. Beigenger, press officer for Bourgogne Tourisme, lists the vineyard open door scheme (close to 300 vigneron welcome visitors, the first sample is always free, there's no obligation to buy); the cycle tours, guided or independent, which follow tracks through the vines and are an ideal way to understand terroir (purchases en route can be delivered to your hotel); the wine-generous cellar lunches; the short wine courses given in English. "Burgundy vigneron understand that tourists like wine and want to understand more about it." Cailleau, deputy director of communications for the Gironde tourism committee, emphasises a similarly broad approach: several

tours into the vineyards each day organised by the Bordeaux tourist office, a list of 150 chateaux selected for their warmly welcoming quality, opportunities to join in the harvest, the "label Bacchus" B&Bs, the Bordeaux Festival du Vin (2010's is June 24-27) where 300,000 people through the quays of the revitalised city. These are only a start. A little Googling will open up a host of possibilities and useful links include www.bourgogne-tourisme.com, www.tourisme-gironde.fr, www.tourisme-champagne-ardenne.com, www.franche-comte.org, www.gastronomie.vins.tourisme-alsace.com/ and www.vinsdeloire.fr. But all these have regional axes to grind. For a much more independent choice, it's hard to beat www.winetravelguides.com. Wine writer Wink Lorch has gathered together expert contributors who provide a wealth of detail,

complete with interactive Michelin maps. The information is free on screen. Printable pdfs of micro-regions are £5, £9 for two, and discounts rise the more you buy. Bon voyage. ❑ But there's a wonderfully comprehensive way to experience the Bordeaux wine experience no further away than St John's Wood. The annual Bordeaux tasting of Primrose Hill merchant Bibendum is at Lord's cricket ground on

April 21 (4pm to 8pm) and more than 85 of the major chateaux will each be showing off the "close to perfect" 2009 vintage, plus an older wine. Tickets are £30 or £100 for four. Email sales@bibendum-wine.co.uk, call 020-7449 4120 or visit www.bibendum-wine.co.uk/retail/events/Bordeaux_Tasting_2010. The event will be a sell-out, so buy soon. LIZ SAGUES

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