

HAMPSTEAD is justly proud of the Keats connection, and in the garden of the recently restored house in Keats Grove (so much better now the smell of yuck new paint no longer makes you sick and swoony with the vapours) it still is difficult not to go slack-jawed at the thought that in this very spot, beneath this very tree, the poet wrote Ode To A Nightingale. But this is not the only house associated with him: in Rome, at the foot of the Spanish Steps, is the Cassina Rossa – and here it was in 1820, during the final stages of consumption and aged only 26, that John Keats came to die. It quickly became something of a shrine, visited over the years by Dickens, Coleridge, Thackeray, Browning and Byron, as well as all sorts of foreign literary bods. By the end of the 19th century, however, the house was crumbling and threatened with demolition. Enter the Keats-Shelley Memorial Association, which rescued it and continue to maintain it as a thriving museum one hundred years on. That little corner of Rome is now always at least knee-deep in tourists concentrating hard upon not just fending off swarms of young Romans on Lambrettas whoopingly intent on their handbags, but also the romance of Keats. Not forgetting either the legendary fountain at the base of the Steps where, in La Dolce Vita, Anita Ekberg so very memorably dunked her considerable form. Currently the Keats-Shelley brigade are campaigning to raise money for the ongoing restoration of the house, and a very worthwhile cause it is. One of the things they want to install, one century after the museum's inception, is a lavatory for the fee-paying public. Not so redolent of romance, maybe – though nonetheless, I should have said, a very good thing indeed in the eyes of the fee-paying public.

So to the wonderful John Soane Museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields, where the Association had laid on a soiree to this end. This was where Soane – architect of among many other things The Bank of England – lived and assembled around him the most extraordinary collection of antiquities, sarcophagi and architectural and sculptural fragments. This small

All of Hampstead's paths lead to Rome

Poet John Keats lived in Hampstead and died in Rome. **Joseph Connolly** salutes him with spaghetti



La Dolce Vita ... Joseph Connolly at Spaghetti House.

museum seems to be openly adored and completely unknown in equal measure. If you have already penetrated the unremarkable façade of this Georgian terraced house, you almost certainly have returned: it is gently addictive, and always thrilling – all the rooms remodelled by Soane so as to provide rather awe-inspiring and very exciting interiors, together with all these unexpected perspectives created by galleries and lightwells. And if you add to this amazing place, as did the Keats-Shelley gang, no more than candlelight, whereby every flicker throws up on low or soaring barrelled ceilings the mellow and looming shadows of titans ... and then if you sprinkle every floor with actors in period costume reading well from Keats

and Shelley ... well then you have quite an evening on your hands. Chuck in champagne, and it's just about perfect. Rumours abounded too as to the existence of canapes. One gentleman I met there swore blind he had spotted one on the upper floors, while a lady had it from an unimpeachable source that one had most definitely graced the drawing room at some point during the evening. One young buck boasted that he had actually devoured one in the crypt, but this was put down to a reckless imagination and the puerile desire for attention.

In short, scoff was needed – so my wife, Sue Bradbury of the Folio Society (and stalwart of the Keats-Shelley lot) along with my starving self tripped over the road to Sicilian Avenue, and one

of London's best-loved Spaghetti Houses. I think that subconsciously I might have selected this to keep the themes of Rome and architecture chugging along. It really is such a glorious pedestrian arcade, this – pale terracotta facings and mouldings to all the frontages, two-tiered fluted Corinthian columns at either end, and many urns and finials ("Oh Attic shape!" as Keats had it, one time: "Fair attitude!"). My own attitude was probably less than fair by now – hunger does this to me. I was reflecting on Holborn as we scanned the menu – because this is not quite Bloomsbury: it's Holborn. Up the road in Southampton Row there used to be Pitman's College, where about a hundred years ago my mother enrolled me because I said I

FACTFILE

- SPAGHETTI HOUSE**
20 Sicilian Avenue, WC1 Tel: 020-7405 5215
- Open Monday to Thursday noon-11pm. Friday to Saturday noon-11.30pm, Sunday 5.30pm-10.30pm.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆
- Cost: Immensely reasonable. For £40, two of you will eat and drink a lot of good things.

wanted to be a writer. But I dropped out of the shorthand because it was difficult – and typing with all 10 digits, that was difficult beyond belief, so I chucked that too. I now write longhand and then type it up with two fingers – so that was money down the drain.

Never mind all that: scoff. I've always had a great fondness for Spaghetti Houses. There are 11 of them currently, dotted about the place, and still it's a family concern. In 1953, one Lorenzo Fraquelli together with Simone Lavarini opened something called the Bamboo Bar in, of all places, Golders Green, but they soon got sick of that. Then two years later came the very first Spaghetti House in Goudge Street, all four floors of it still always bustling. There is a lot of point to these places: they are open all day long, for a start – and unlike other operations I could very easily mention (and in the case of Pizza Hut, I actually shall) they do serve very decent food indeed, at a remarkably modest price. The Sicilian Avenue branch is deceptively enormous: it just goes on for ever – all sorts of twists and turns and surprising little alcoves: they really ought to give you a map.

God, I was starving (have I said this?) and the manager, I felt

sure, instinctively understood. The other great thing is that the food comes fast. No starters for us – when you're hollow, you don't want a platter of dainty little bits and bobs, do you really? So for Sue, penne Arrabbiata – huge plate, tomato sauce and chilli: "Not too hot", she said. "Bang on." My wife had tagliatelle with chicken, asparagus, parmesan, mint and olive oil: huge plate, only £10.75, and she loved it. I didn't speak for ages as I was eagerly shovelling down a (huge) plate of polpettine: spaghetti in a very good and creamy tomato and mushroom sauce, and liberally scattered with little pork and beef meatballs. Oh yum. Now here's a funny thing: although I'd been famished, I couldn't go a pudding. I was very pleasantly stuffed. The affable manager was back (all the service is lovely here – swift and friendly) and he affably managed to persuade my companions: they both had vast and gooey puddings, because they're girls. One was big on chocolate ice cream, the other majoring in something like cassata. I wasn't paying much attention, quite frankly – because here's another funny thing: we had this carafe of house red, okay? Cheap. So no more than serviceable at best, you'd think. And yet it had a good and plummy depth that you just had to sit up and notice: very slightly fizzy, as young Italian red can be – a big mouthful, though, and even a bit of a lingering finish. No, that's a rubbish description, really – why don't we leave it to Keats ...? "Alive with sparkles – never, I aver, since Ariadne was a vintage, so cool a purple."

So there you have it: straight from the poet's mouth.

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

CONVENTIONAL columns celebrate commercially popular events, the likes of Mother's Day or the World Cup, with wines to suit. But I don't know your mother's tastes, nor am I a football enthusiast. So I'd prefer to make a fuss about less obvious happenings, quite likely ones you've never even heard of, where wine is the central focus rather than the accessory.

So, a year on from a column where I sang the praise of a particular independent wine importer, I'm back on the same theme. Les Caves de Pyrene has just held another tasting and, while it wasn't open to consumer wine drinkers, there are chances to share something of the same experience – watch the website for occasional ticketed events. You'll also find there an explanation of the complicated origin of the company name (it has to do with a Mediterranean legend and the largest cave in Europe ...).

Les Caves titles its offerings

Wishes granted in an Aladdin's cave

"real wine" and the quality and individuality are wonderfully impressive. "Wonderful" was, in fact, an over-used word in my notes that day.

Of some 300 bottles open, I tasted barely a fifth, because there is no way these wines can be dismissed with a quick sniff and slurp and a minimal comment. Time and again, I wished I'd been able to sit and reflect over a glass, with the right food.

While the aftermath of the volcanic ash cloud meant only a dozen of the 100-plus growers who had planned the trip actually arrived



in west London, the wines were more than able to speak for themselves. And it was encouraging to see the pleasure that the growers who did attend took in tasting their rivals' – or, more professionally, colleagues' – wines.

I began in Anjou, with four examples of chenin blanc, each one splendid yet entirely different. Coincidentally, the next day, during judgement time on wines reckoned medal-worthy in this year's International Wine Challenge, I encountered a line-up of double that number truly disappointing South African chensins: all drearily dull.

So stay in France and take your pick of Coteau des Treilles from Pithon-Paille, elegant from

its nutty aromas through concentrated fruit to lingering crispness (£32); Anjou Blanc and Anjou Blanc BB from Rene Mosse, the first rounded and ripe yet still fresh, the second with amazing finesse and length (£19, £39), all these 2008; and Sylvain Martinez's 2007 Goutte d'O from 80-year-old vines, pure, restrained and again memorably long (£28).

Other French gems (France, followed by Italy, dominated the choice) include marvellous Minervois from Clos du Gravillais – not just dark, deep herby-fruity reds such as Rendez Vous du Soleil 2007 (£17) but also a rare and fascinating white, L'Inattendu 2008 (£22). Or the starchy whites from Olivier Pithon in Roussillon, Cuvee Lais 2008 (£23) and La D18 (£35). Close by is Stephane and Marjorie Gallet's Le Roc des Anges, with 80-year-

old vines making a stylish Vieilles Vignes white (£20), plus a classic southern red blend of syrah, grenache and carignan, Segna de Cor, posh for the price (£15).

Among more southern names to savour are Matassa, Domaine d'Aupilhac and Mas de Daumas Gassac; and in the Loire Roches Neuves (Saumur-Champigny), Frantz Saumon (Montlouis), and Pelle (Menetou-Salon).

There are many further delights – download the list from www.lescaves.co.uk and phone the shop (it's just outside Guildford) to order. A selection of Les Caves wines is also available at www.greenandblue.wines.com and Oddbins will have Rene Mosse Anjou Blanc from June.

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HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

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