

Election lunch leaves us as much in dark as the result

SOMEbody tipped me the wink a couple of weeks ago that there was apparently an election going on. Well they kept pretty quiet about that then, didn't they? Who'd have known? Though I thought in the light of this new information I might as well toddle on down to Finchley Road in order to exercise my democratic right as I have done God alone knows how many times in the past. And the ritual process, I always find it so very appalling and quaintly comforting in equal measure: doing things the old way in a slumped and dingy gymnasium, with no hint at all of technological interference. There was this bloke outside – who I instantly had down as one of the wisest and cleverest men in the land because he told me how much he liked my restaurant reviews in the Ham&High. And just inside the door was a very sweet elderly lady sporting a big blue sash who was eerily blessed with similar mental prowess and great self-evident perspicacity because she too told me how much she liked my restaurant reviews in the Ham&High. Then my wife and I went about the hilarious procedure of ensuring a secret ballot by means of the volunteer behind the trestle table carefully matching up the codes and address on our polling cards with the printed lists and numbered voting papers, these then duly stamped and recorded. And so in you go to your rickety tea chest, clutching with zeal the charcoal pencil tied up with the

There were highlights – but the Chinese resaurant in Finchley Road was as dingy as the polling station where **Joseph Connolly** had just gone to cast his vote

FACTFILE
 GREEN COTTAGE
 9 New College Parade,
 Finchley Road, NW3 Tel 020
 7722 5305
 Open every day from 12
 noon- 11.15pm
 FOOD 6
 SERVICE 6
 Cost: £30 should see two of
 you stuffed, without booze.

sort of rough and whitish twine that no-one has seen since the 1950s. You can be trusted to vote for a government, but not to resist nicking the pencil. And then on the way out you hand your polling card to the lady the hue of whose rosette most appeals to you, thereby further guaranteeing the sanctity of your political inclinations.
 I remember once the most wonderful fist fight on the pavement outside. This man was declaiming that he'd vote for Margaret Thatcher only when hell froze over, and then found himself on the receiving end of a devastating uppercut, so outraged by this virtual blasphemy was the red-faced person he was addressing. "You are an ignorat

pig!" came the accompanying bellow. "I don't even know why I married you in the first place!"
 Anyway – after so much Britishness, let's go somewhere exotic for lunch, shall we? Some louche and cosmopolitan area of London, I think – the sort with a main drag that can boast an Istanbul supermarket, a tanning salon, an acupuncturist, the offer of a Thai massage or even a Thai lunch, and no end of Indian and Chinese restaurants: why yes – Finchley Road, just opposite Amy's Hardware Store, where else in the world? And so more or less at random I plumped for – no, not Conservative Cottage, not Labour Cottage, not even Lib-Dem Cottage – but Green Cottage, which in itself doesn't necessarily betray my very secret vote. First impressions, though, are dire – and particularly on a sunny afternoon, when it's like walking into the cupboard under the stairs. Quite as dingy as the electoral gymnasium down the road – grubby once-white walls, distressed beige floor tiles (well wouldn't you be, if a floor tile?) whose misguided design suggests that they are even grubbier still, no discernible lighting, a couple of monochrome brush paintings, and the odd nod to happiness and prosperity by means



Place for a party ...
Joseph Connolly at
The Green Cottage.

of a few muted symbols. School chairs, a paper tablecloth, frayed and dog-eared menus, and a single dying flower on the table. Well. Quite a few of these tables, though, were filled with Chinese people, which is always said to be a good thing, isn't it? Although I've never been particularly reassured by mobs of English ramming a branch of Gregg's, but there you go.
 The menu is huge, as ever in this sort of place – and it's difficult when there are only two of you to know if you've ordered too much food. So from the very largely Cantonese selection we went for deep fried prawns in sliced spring roll pastry and crispy seaweed for the starter, to which my wife added steamed pork dumplings because she really loves, she says, steamed pork dumplings. And to follow, roast duck Cantonese off the bone (there is too an on the bone option, but look – we're talking chopsticks here, so I can see this only as masochism and perversity taken a degree too far). The duck is from the barbecue section, which also offers lizard. No, hang on – it offers liver and gizzard with squid, which is probably just as bad. Then shredded pork chow mein, deep fried scallops and special fried rice. "Is that too much?" I asked the waitress. She hummed, she hawed. "How hungry are you...?" Right, then: too much. So we dumped the rice.
 Now this place has been here for 30 years, and I know it's very popular, especially for parties and get-togethers – and as the food was

piled on to the table, I began to see why: it ain't the atmosphere, it's the extraordinarily large portions. Even without the rice there was enough here for three human beings and a supermodel. The prawns were covered in this rather pretty golden fleece of shredded fried pastry that made each one look like a figurine of Dougal from Magic Roundabout. The prawn was a little lost in so magnificent a pelt, but they were good enough. Fried seaweed is always a treat, though this was exceptionally good – very tangy and utterly crisp. The four dumplings came on a bed of cabbage in the bamboo box in which they were steamed – rather slithery, and looking to me like miniature raw and recently aborted Cornish pasties, so I left them all to my wife – who, because she really loves steamed pork dumplings, she says, ate just one of them and quite manfully pretended to enjoy it. The accompanying tea didn't really taste of much, but the little cups came up trumps in ensuring the time-honoured tradition of badly scalded fingers. Say what you like about Chinese civilisation, but I don't think that the Western invention of handles (not to say knives and forks) may be seen to be wholly a bad thing.
 Then came even larger plates of food, and two tiny little porcelain bowls from which to eat. This necessitated refilling them about a hundred times, but never mind. The duck was truly delicious – warm, tender and flavoursome, though the slightly gloopy soyish

sauce was perfectly cold which, whether by accident or design, was a mistake. The chow mein too was good, but that also suffered from the gloop factor in a rather too monosodium-glutamate sort of a way, while still, of course, remaining very moreish. The 12 scallops in perfectly bronzed deep fried bubbles were extremely good, each scallop juicy and precisely steamed within its crunchy cocoon; and a bargain at £8.60. As, I suppose, was the final bill of just over £40: no booze, of course, but a lot of food. The place was fullish on a Thursday lunchtime, and the grub was evidently enjoyed by everyone around – not least the two rather earnest ladies on a break from the Anna Freud Centre, one could not help but gather, amiably comparing various lunatics of their acquaintance.
 In the end, the dingy factor got to me: it's a pretty depressing place to be. Though on balance I don't at all blame them for the paper tablecloths – no matter how tidy you're trying to be, the end result always looks like the fallout from a toddler's tantrum. I wouldn't be in a huge rush to return, though – what I'll maybe do is go again at the next General Election. So not too long at all, then.
 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.

ALL that recent research showing the health benefits of (a little) alcohol has evidently been a waste of time. Simply refer to the medieval priest who detailed its 40 virtues in a "very useful book for conserving one's health and staying in good form".
 But Maitre Vital Dufour, prior of the French Gascon town of Eauze, was specific in the alcohol he recommended: aygue ardente, the ancestor of armagnac, spirit of the Musketeers. His list of virtues, which included powers to cure deafness, kidney stones and gout and to "recall the past to memory", was penned in 1310. It was the first mention of armagnac, so 2010 is a happy anniversary year.
 That's what representatives of the 840 growers and negociants who are responsible for the 6.6 million bottles sold each year worldwide were celebrating when they came to London for the first 700th birthday event (others follow in Chicago, Moscow and

Toast armagnac in its 700th year

Paris). The tasting room at Mayfair's Connaught Hotel – which, incidentally, has the best selection of armagnacs in the UK, largely because chef Helene Darroze is from an armagnac family – was packed, a happy omen for all those who love this fascinating, friendly spirit.
 I know: this is a wine column. But armagnac is the most wine-like of spirits, reflecting both its terroir and the floral, fruity scents and flavours of local grape varieties folle blanche and coulombard, which have made vin de pays de Gascogne so popular in the UK. Other grapes, though, are now



usually the predominant ingredient: the cognac choice, ugni blanc, or the robust hybrid named after its schoolmaster inventor Monsieur Baco. But armagnac remains gloriously aromatic.
 Accepted wisdom is that 20 per cent of its character comes from grape varieties and the terroir – there are three different Armagnac regions; 30 per cent from the distillation process – a single slow pass through the alambic as opposed to cognac's double distillation; and 50 per cent from the ageing, in barrels made from Gascon or Limousin oak, which allow gentle evaporation of some of the alcohol, known as the angels' share.
 This all means that there is the potential for considerable variations, and you can certainly taste the differences. Each of the

11 exhibitors had at least six bottles open and every one offered specific aromas and flavours. No, I didn't try them all, but, in a selection of 20-plus, there was a great deal of varied pleasure.
 Without an experience like that, it's difficult to find favourites (mine include Casterede, Chateau de Millet, Delord, Marquis de Montesquiou and Tariquet). Seek advice in bars and restaurants or buy to try at home. Independent spirit specialists will have the best choice but other sources include Nicolas stores, Waitrose, Oddbins and www.bibendum-wine.co.uk. Prices? Anything from £17 to £450... Websites are useful to learn a lot more: www.armagnac.fr (in French), http://Armagnac UK.blogspot.com or www.armagnotheque.com. In armagnacs, there is

enormous tradition but also modernity. An acceptance that spirit sales these days can't simply rely on the post-prandial market has seen the development of La Blanche, a white armagnac intended as an aromatic addition to the cocktail mix, plus plenty of cocktail ideas for the original golden spirit.
 The French remain the biggest consumers, but the UK is a crucial market, Sebastien Lacroix, president of the armagnac professional group, told me, adding that UK drinkers are connoisseurs, heading for the older blends and vintage bottles. All the more reason to toast a happy 700th birthday.

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HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

Mixer taps, particularly in showers, should be controlled by a fail safe thermostatic control to avoid scalding. This will help prevent the age old problem of calling out to others in the property not to use the water supply while you are in the shower.

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