

HAVERSTOCK Hill's cup might soon runneth over. We are all well used to the ever changing cluster of eateries the length of this fine broad-paved boulevard reaching down from the old Town Hall (now a virtually useless white elephant, it appears to me) and on past Belsize Park tube station...and now there's a new Chez on the block! Chez Bob has taken over the premises of Black & Blue, a steak joint which I wrote about here a little while ago.

There is already Chez Nous, I have yet to visit, while the other Chez, of course, is Chez Gerard, in the base of the Premier Inn. This was the very first restaurant I reviewed for this column, and remains the very worst.

One or two others have come tantalisingly close (one thinks of The Wallace and The Bull in Highgate – now closed down) but none so far has quite plumbed the depths as did Chez Gerard. Unlike The Bull, it's still there, though – I can only assume because of the, shall we say, undemanding palate of the hotel's itinerants.

So Chez Bob sprawls quite comfortably just a bit down from the once quite noble old Town Hall (T.S. Eliot and I were married there, you know – though not obviously to one another, because that would be completely ridiculous).

It was a warm afternoon when I, with my wife (who is the one I did marry, of course) pitched up there last week – and due to this balminess and, in joint measure, the cacophony of clanging music inside the restaurant, we collared a nice round table on the pavement.

While the big and wonky yellow lettering on the chocolate brown façade of Chez Bob looks as if it was knocked up by a cackling and one-eyed drunk in the middle of the night, the interior is freshly attractive – white and primrose largely, though a couple of walls are covered in what at first glance looks to be a traditional cream and scarlet bedroom flock, but under closer inspection the



Round table meal ... Joseph waits with the box of sauces for the serving.

pattern actually turns out to be made up of the repeat and stylised silhouette of a cowboy on a rearing stallion.

This sort of joke is quite in at the moment, in the weird and wacky world of wallpaper: you

can get what seems to be a standard and romantic Toile de Jouy, but is, in fact, quite thoroughly pornographic. I thought you may wish to know this.

So here we are on the

pavement, and the view – as seems now customary in Hampstead – is of big, green Murphy vans, a litter of their dirty orange Murphy barriers, but, of course, no actual Murphys toiling in the bomb-site of their

New Chez Bob's really worth it

A persistently loud example of Murphy's Law during the meal at a round table on the pavement was endured by **Joseph Connolly** for his review

FACTFILE

❑ CHEZ BOB
205-207 Haverstock Hill, NW3
Tel: 020-7435 4925
❑ Open all day. Brunch from 11am to 4pm. Larger menu afterwards.
❑ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
❑ Service: ★★★★★★★★☆☆
❑ About £45 for two courses for two, with a drink. Brunch rather cheaper.

own creation.

A pretty and smiling Italian waitress soon tipped up with menus and unbidden purified water – a nice touch, that – in the sort of bottle with a wire and porcelain lid a la Grolsch that I can never bloody work. I gazed in amazement at the word printed large in white across her tightly-stretched black T-shirt said was 'Bob.'

They seem very proud of their name here – there is a sandwich board proclaiming 'Bob Time' (half price on some beers and cocktails) and among the extensive list of cocktails is a Bloody Bobby. Some wines are offered as 'Bob's Picks', while others, rather disarmingly, are divided into Cheap, Decent and Good – and I ended up ordering Bob's steak frittes with garlic herb butter.

My wife wanted grilled sea bass (not Bob's, this – someone else's entirely) with roasted ratatouille and parsley new potatoes...but it turned out there might be a problem with our order because while an 'All Day Brunch Menu' may be seen to be an attractive thing, it appears that in this place it is mandatory: we had requested dishes from the 'Post-4pm' menu, apparently – which seems about as bizarre an idea as any. "I'll ask chef," said the waitress, affably.

So we waited: the question is – can Bob fix it? Turns out he can, so that's all right then. A big wooden box of bottled and jarred condiments was placed upon the table, among which, along with all the usual suspects, was Mrs H.S. Ball's Original Recipe Chutney: it's not nice, or anything. And just as the food was served, my dear chum Mr Murphy switched on a generator, the resultant roar generally setting the crockery to dancing on the galvanised table.

Men were still not working, but by God this bloody generator was. My steak – seemingly a well-trimmed rump mercilessly beaten flat – was draped across a

generous hillock of truly excellent frittes: crispy, not a touch of grease and neither over-salted.

The steak, though – requested medium – was very well done. I didn't send it back because I frankly doubted whether a steak so very thin as this could ever truly be medium: raw or cooked, take your pick, really. Also I was starving. The flavour was okay.

My wife's sea bass too was way overcooked, and consequently quite dried out. New potatoes tip-top, ratatouille rather hot. We then realised we needed something green, and within a few minutes really good and al dente broccoli and asparagus were brought with a smile. We had a glass of prosecco and a glass of pinot grigio rose from the 'Good' section ... and they were good.

And suddenly our Italian waitress was replaced by an Australian one (I don't think it was anything I said) who was immediately and winningly enthusiastic: "Now look – I really, really, really recommend the chocolate brownie. I'm not a chocolate brownie person and I'm eating them all the time."

This struck me as rather Australian and also irresistible, so a brownie was ordered to share (although I had been hovering over Bob's Big Bad Sundae which contains just everything gorgeous and goeey you can think of, and then is covered in Smarties!). I was relieved when the brownie arrived – I thought the waitress might have been overcome and scoffed it along the way.

She was right, though – this is a brownie among brownies: huge, moist, warm, on a hot chocolate sauce and topped with great vanilla ice cream – obscene, really, and none the worse for that. My wife took an oath on the spot to return to this place solely to worship at the temple of the brownie each and every single day for the rest of her natural life. Women, eh? What are you going to do?

But the noise of the generator was really getting to me now – my skull was rattling with the pain of it. So I wanted to leave – but still

there was one thing I just had to find out, and so I put it squarely to the waitress: "So...who's Bob?" She smiled delightedly. "Bob! He's the cowboy on the wallpaper!" "You're kidding me." "No – the owner decided. Crazy, isn't it? He owns the restaurant in Crouch End called Monkey Nuts." It's an education, isn't it?

Eating out. But this cowboy, though...cowboys are called Shane and Duke and Zeke and Jesse – or even The Man With No Name: but Bob? Ah, well. I went to the gent's, then. It was called Bob. The Ladies is called Sue. Oh, God – well, I had to ask, didn't I? "Who's Sue?" The waitress laughed. "Bob's wife – we make it all up as we go along." What a happy ship. Be warned, though, if you just happen to be a boy named Sue.

And get this: as we got up to leave, the generator immediately and abruptly cut out, filling the air with silence. Here then, in action, was Murphy's Law.

❑ *Joseph Connolly's novel Summer Things would be perfect, you know, if we get a summer. Or even not. (Faber & Faber, £7.99). All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.*

Possibly a vintage of the century...

YEARS back, I went on a press trip to Beaujolais. It was a happy occasion: great wines, good company and the chance to experience a proper French "fete du vin" where consumers thronged a village celebrating the fine new vintage, tasting, talking and enjoying wine with no hint of drunken excess.

Since then, many of the vintages haven't encouraged quite such pleasure, so it's a delight to report that 2009 beaujolais is a triumph – ripe fruit, skilled wine-making and bottles which show that the gamay grape can turn into wines of classy style way above the thin, acidic, bananas-and-bubble-gum beaujolais nouveau which has damned the appellation here.

As I learned on that trip, beaujolais is not just one wine. Nouveau apart, there's the quaffing wine from grapes grown on the clayey plain. Move up onto the more northerly sand-over-granite slopes and quality rises proportionately: first beaujolais villages, and then the 10 crus which put just their village name on the bottles.

The crus are fascinating, reflecting differences in soil and exposition as well as winemaking style. But rarely is there a chance here to study their individuality in detail. A big thank you, then, to Berry Bros & Rudd for firstly expanding its beaujolais range to celebrate the outstanding vintage

and secondly for opening all 23 bottles (from eight crus) on its list to display their character to the wine press.

They ran from a restrained, mineral-edged beaujolais vieilles vignes from Alain Chatoux (£9.95) to a massively impressive Moulin a Vent from Thibault Liger-Belair, better known for his burgundy. That's still in cask, but expected to retail at approximately £26 when it's bottled later this year.

Even the lightest are wines of style and substance, dark in colour (the ripeness of the 2009 gamay grapes has allowed lots of extraction but without bitterness) and full of velvety fruit, backed by smooth tannins in the serious age-worthy examples.

"Beaujolais is on the brink of a renaissance," says Berrys' burgundy director Jasper Morris. And he argues that despite the burgundian level of care and attention by their producers the 2009s "are absolute bargains."

Of those available, Bernard Metrat's Chiroubles (£14.50) and the Fleurie Les Moriers from Michel Chignard et Fils (£14.95) are quintessential examples, but all are excellent. Mix a case, and have happy summers in 2010 and beyond.

There are highly-recommended 2009 bottles elsewhere, too. Among those I've enjoyed are: Domaine Sigaux Les Quarteteles Brouilly, (Laitwhaites, £12), Louis Jadot



Combe aux Jacques Beaujolais Villages (Waitrose, £9), Chateau de la Terriere Beaujolais Villages (Majestic, £9, two-plus £7.50), Chateau de Pizay Morgon (Majestic £9, two-plus £7). Stone, Vine and Sun (www.stonevine.co.uk) has a fine choice, five now and more to come – the Chenas (£10.75) and Julienas vieilles vignes (£14.50) from Bernard Sante are especially tempting.

If you've never been to Beaujolais (capital B for the region, lower case for the wine), why not consider a 2010 trip to taste even more pleasure. The landscape of the crus is non-stop vine-covered rolling hills (well, you might just see a cow or a coppice) and the vignerons are welcoming. Some of the vines are among the most venerable I've seen, old and gnarled – the antithesis of nouveau.

And remember that beaujolais is one of the best possible summer wines – the most powerful on Berrys' list were 13.5pc alcohol and many were lower. Chill the new wines lightly and enjoy a vintage which may not be repeated this century.

LIZ SAGUES