

Seasonings need a wake-up from Belsize bogeyman

As a boy, **Joseph Connolly** was spooked by The Demon who ran London's cheapest sweet shop. Retracing those childhood steps, he visits a celebrity haunt whose very agreeable dishes could do with sauces with just a bit more bite to them

BELSIZE Village holds all sorts of memories for me, and most of them sweet. While attending St Anthony's in Fitzjohn's Avenue as a fresh-faced short-trousered innocent (a degree of imagination could well be useful here) I used every day to pass through its centre on my journey to and from the school. It was a fair distance from where we lived in Adelaide Road, and in summer the bright blue woollen blazer, knee-length itchy stockings and de rigueur cap were terribly hot and uncomfortable. In winter though, and in the rain, your two poor bare little pink and chapped knees ... they really did come in for it – but somehow we managed without recourse to Range Rovers, cashmere or counselling. After school I was always ravenous, and in those days – on the corner site now occupied by Oddbins – there was what could loosely be described, I suppose, as a newsagent and confectioner. But not really – in truth, it was the lair of the bogeyman, as all of us knew: maybe even Satan himself. We did actually call him The Demon. It was always so dark in there, and smelled of dead animals. The Demon sat at the back of the dank and perishing space in two overcoats and a greasy cap, a roll-jammed between his thin white lips. He never moved, he never spoke. We dared to go in there only because his cheapest sweets were quite cheaper than anywhere else, quite possibly because they were so often shattered, largely rancid and quite possibly pre-war. He chuckled your ha'pennies into an old cigar

FACTFILE

□ **ARTIGIANO**
12 Belsize Terrace, NW3
Tel: 020-7794 4288
□ Open Tuesday to Sunday
noon-3pm, Monday to Saturday
7pm-11pm, Sunday 7pm-10pm
□ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆
□ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆
□ Cost: Set lunch £10 for two
courses. Set dinner £16.50 for
two courses. A la carte about
£90 for three courses for two
with wine.

box, and glowered. Blimey – we were in and out of there like lightning, I can tell you – but never faster than one cold December afternoon when slowly, before our disbelieving and soup-plate eyes, he rose up from the bales of ancient and disintegrating newspapers in which he was permanently cocooned. We had no idea he had legs attached or anything, and were dumb. And then his mouth was moving, his eyes as hard and bright as embers. "Today is Thursday!" he suddenly roared. "Thursday is half-day closing ... and I forgot to close!" He then slumped back into the compression of newsprint, and might even have wept. I wouldn't know because by then I had covered the rest of the journey home in way under two minutes flat, heaving up at the door purple and sweating like a carthorse. Later, when Hell had reclaimed The Demon as one of their own, the place became a Rumbolds where a normal human being would sell you a big currant bun

for 2d. Which, for younger readers, means 120 buns for a quid. A quid was something grown-ups were rumoured to possess.

I only lived then for food and imagination (plus ca change) – and sometimes on that journey home I would be at the wheel of a Highway Patrol black Buick, spitting out engine noises, squealing the brakes – while on other days I would swap this for Trigger, Roy Rogers's palomino, with all the relevant snort and whinnying. Last week, though, I settled for simple locomotion when my wife and I wandered down there from Hampstead at a suitably middle-aged pace, and fetched up at Artigiano. This long-established Italian restaurant is rather larger than it seems from the outside – a decent, bright and clean room with a pale ceramic tiled floor, generous tables with proper white cloths, man-sized napkins and comfortable high-backed chairs upholstered in suede (both mock and mocha). The ceiling air-con units are cleverly featured by means of concealed and subtly colour-changing light diffusion – one minute it's amber nectar, the next it's meths. There are stairs down to a cosier section beneath a sloping glass roof, and this in turn leads to a lower level yet. It's all a rather confident and well-addressed space that clearly has had its moments in the sun: framed photographs and encomia from luminaries such as Hugh Laurie, Madonna, Ronnie Wood and Kate Moss. Oh yeh – also Bono, but you can't have everything. The welcome is warm and happy, while the music seems

to be a looped compilation of all the very most abject Eurovision offerings, all down the years. On the Tuesday lunchtime we were there, only two other tables were taken – and as I suspect the bargain £10 two course set lunch is the draw here, turnover will have been tiny. But in the evenings and in summertime it is said to bustle – as tends to be true of the affiliated café right next door.

My wife liked the look of this £10 lunch, with three choices per course. She went for mussels with a herb and bread gratinee, followed by breast of chicken stuffed with aubergine and thyme on a tomato carpaccio (as in sliced raw tomato). I, being the boss, was going a la carte with poached asparagus, sauteed quail's eggs and hollandaise, at £7.50. The asparagus of course was wonderful because it was still new season English, and the two little fried eggs were dinky indeed and gratifyingly gooey. The hollandaise looked the part, but actually tasted of nothing, needing a good extra slug of decent wine vinegar: it would not at all have done on an Eggs Benedict. My wife's four largeish mussels were completely dried out, any flavour solely down to the gratinee which turned out to be Parmesan dominated: not great. The bread was exceptionally good, and served in a basket made of gossamer and wooden woven slivers, like the strawberry punnets of old. Ordinary water was served warm, rather oddly, but in support we had a Peroni (for my larger lout mate) and a glass of Chianti for me. The wines, I noticed, rose to



A sound place ... Joseph at Artigiano.

£420 a bottle, but mercifully there's a more than okay affordable selection.

As we were waiting for our mains, I idly looked about me. Funny, I thought, that in an Italian restaurant the only wall decorations should be a section of Indian carved fretwork and some bas relief plaques that were surely Hellenic ...? And then a chap came in on his own – clearly a valued regular – and ordered a glass of sherry: I can barely remember the last time I heard it. My wife was extremely pleased with her chicken – it was a very generous breast, as set lunch portions go, and she had ordered as well some potatoes sauteed in rosemary on the side. These came in golden cubes, though the rosemary was undetectable. Similarly, the enticing comma of jus – it had the gloss, it had the appearance, but flavour was utterly absent. Which could not be said of my straccetti al ragu: here were thin square pasta leaves, like smaller lasagne, with a tremendous meaty sauce (chopped fillet, it said on the menu), the advertised Barolo strongly to the fore. Actual slices, as opposed to a grating, of Parmesan were just so: this dish was exemplary. My wife had now

decided that her chicken was the best she had had in ages, and so everything was rather hunky dory – except for the music which now had switched to the amplified echo of someone despairing in both a bathroom and torment, just prior to the toss-up between pills and a razor blade.

We shared a Coppa del Bosco – a frilly wafer cup (which proved to be uncrackably hard) with various berries – straw, black and blue. The accompanying zabaglione sauce, though ... bland again. Apart from my ragu, all flavour and seasoning and been far too restrained: I wonder why? Complimentary biscotti to round us off – shaped like Mary Quant's daisy: good, fresh and almondy. It's a sound place, this, and we walked out pretty pleased. I left my wife to cope with the temperament of Trigger: I myself was taking no chances – so I gunned up the Highway Patrol black Buick and pulled away fast, keen to be distant from any remaining vestige of The Demon.

□ *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.*

Flavour of wines makes independent a winner

COMPARE and contrast: that's more than a regular exam question formula. It can also be the role of a wine writer, and a very recent experience is a case in point.

There were two tastings on the same day, one run by a high street grocer with reasonable wine credentials, the other by a small, independent, largely online/mail order merchant. They were only a couple of minutes walk apart, but they couldn't have been more different.

The first I went to was the Co-op's: 66 wines, almost half priced at under £6. The second showed the summer offering from Stone, Vine & Sun: 50 wines, just three below £6, a further 18 in the £6 to £10 bracket.



But let's ignore the figures and consider instead the pleasure of

wine. I'd far, far rather drink a single glass of a wine I really enjoy than knock back half a bottle of something which gives little more than an alcoholic kick. If you're reading this, I hope you agree.

I'm sad about the Co-op experience. When I put down my glass after wine number 51 (there were some I decided not to try), I wondered if it was my palate, whether perhaps it was a particularly inauspicious day for tasting. But what happened along the road a few minutes later proved that it wasn't.

The Co-op does some good things in wine. It has, for example, one of the sunniest sub-£6 pinks around, Le Village du Sud (normally £5.25, but £4.25

from June 16 to July 6), and it generously supports a lot of Fairtrade good work, the latest being the first Fairtrade-funded secondary school in Argentina.

But where was that sought-after pleasure? Rare indeed among the wines in that tasting.

But SVS offered it, even among its lower-priced wines. True value-for-money stars included Mas du Canal 2009, a Provence rose look and taste-alike from the Midi, bursting with ripe red fruits, crisp and classy (£5.75); easy-drinking, fragrant La Croix Belle Caringole blanc, Cotes de Thongue 2009 (£6.95); lovely cherry-flavoured, grenache-dominated Cotes du Rhone Terra Vitis 2009 from the small but serious Vignerons

d'Estezargues (£6.75) and characterful, herby Spanish monastrell in Honoro Vera Jumilla 2008 (£5.75).

All through the range, the wines are very fairly priced. Another stylish Rhone is the deep-flavoured Le Prieure d'Arras Saint Joseph 2006 (£12.95); classic minerality plus lingering fruit comes in Domanie d'Elise Petit Chablis 2008 (£10.50) and there's restrained elegance and memorable length in St Aubin blanc Premier Cru Champelots 2007 from Denis Clair (£19.95).

For sweeter tastes, the richly mineral, ripe-fruited riesling from Waipara Springs (£9.95) is an appealing example of the New Zealand dessert wines now

allowed into the UK. And to finish, a perfect partner for Wimbledon strawberries: frothy, grape-sweet Innocent Bystander pink moscato from Australia (£5.75 a half bottle, just 5.5 per cent alcohol).

You can't pick these wines off the shelf as you buy your supermarket grocery staples, but it doesn't take too much effort to visit www.stonevine.co.uk or dial 01962 712351. There is a delivery charge, from £5.50 to £10 according to the number of cases, though it is waived for a spend of £250 or more.

It's a very small extra to pay for wines which are so individual and so pleasurable.