

When only one helping is enough to swallow...

What can seem like eating in the round can be such a hard thing to digest, as **Joseph Connolly** recently found out

WHO on earth could ever contemplate coming here twice...? That was the question that went on battering me as my son Charles and I stumbled back out on to the Finchley Road from the lowering basement that is Benihana – an ugly corner building hard by the Ham & High's Swiss Cottage offices, and one of London's unlikeliest restaurants, which nonetheless has somehow survived since the 1970s.

Most people will have some sort of memory of having been here in the mercifully distant past when unavoidably dragged into some godawful sort of children's celebration or other – for here, really, is the very nub of Benihana: a rather embarrassingly forced and dated poor man's circus: some entertainment for the kiddies, a few little titbits of inconsequential griddled grub, and all for not too very much more than the price of eating in an excellent restaurant, somewhere else entirely (which I terribly wish I had).

The exterior is festooned with a giant photograph of a very smug Japanese cook, sporting the trademark red toque. Also a vast poster which proclaims in bold: Seven Course Feast From. And that's it. They maybe didn't dare print the starting price for fear of frightening away the few poor deluded punters who occasionally wander down there. Nine, on this particular Thursday evening – including a family of five, all wearing kingfisher blue nylon clothes.

Maybe they were dressed like this for a bet – or possibly they are founder members of a very

elite dining club who every Thursday night ferret out the most ludicrous and overpriced place they can find in order to gorge on a Seven Course Feast From: who can say?

The tables are all communal here, which makes the whole affair even more dispiriting than it already is. The British are no good at communal – we sort of plaster on a half-smile and then half-eye one another with mild repulsion, if not outright animosity.

We can just about manage communal abroad, but then we are pie-eyed on Sangria and determined to wring out value from the package – we force ourselves upon unsuspecting couples so that on our return we may bore people silly about how very charming and entertaining they were – here sound evidence that our minds had been duly broadened.

On our table there were three teenage schoolgirls, conceivably from South Hampstead up the road, the prettiest of whom was confiding in the others, while sipping a Cosmopolitan, that "like, five-star hotels, yeh? They like not too expensive, rilly." Ah but then what is, when someone else is paying? I actually felt quite sorry for them – of all the places to eat in London – even North London – they had to pitch up here.

I ordered a glass of rose, and Charles had a pint of Asahi beer. Well, not quite a pint, actually: 500cl for £6.15. I looked at the rather fingered menu: no sign of a Seven Course Feast From, but a very basic choice of main ingredient for your 'Hibachi Dinner': steak, chicken or prawn, all plain grilled or teriyaki. Preceding this was what was



The chef's dish ... Joseph witnesses splendid slices and flicks.

billed as 'onion soup with chicken and meat'.

That word 'meat' has haunted me for days – what unspeakable flesh could this have possibly been, that they couldn't run to giving it a name...? It hardly mattered – the flavour was largely that of a stock cube, with all the commensurate salt. Then there's a miserable bit of salad – mostly very tired lettuce of the sort that forms the bed for a mingy prawn cocktail, and nobody eats. To which I added side orders of shitake mushrooms and 'hibachi rice,' which means special fried.

They chuck in about three wee prawns to get you going, with some very dull and claggy plain boiled rice. But look! Excitement

is about to unfold – the chef is here! In a trademark red toque! Oh, my Lord! He, anyway, seemed to be utterly thrilled by his very own presence, which was more than could be said for the diners. He sliced deftly, and seemed to expect applause. He flicked a prawn up into the air, which landed very stupidly on his hat.

From the expression on his face you would swear that he had just pulled off something beyond extraordinary, or even worthwhile. Then – his name, if I caught it right, was Randy – he urged the prettiest of the schoolgirls to open her mouth so that he could lob a mushroom into it. Being British, she was

FACTFILE

❑ BENIHANA

100 Avenue Road, NW3.

Tel: 020 7586 9508.

❑ Open for lunch 12 – 3pm.

Dinner Mon – Sat 5.30 –

10.30pm. Sun 5 – 10pm

❑ Food: ★★☆☆☆☆☆☆

❑ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆

❑ Cost: Not much under £100

for two for not much at all.

Very bad value.

naturally mortified – but being British, she naturally did as she was told ("Oh my Gaad – this is like just so not going to waark...!") She was right: the mushroom hit her nose, and then the floor. Then the chef was batting a used lemon quarter into a hole in the hibachi: this, he seemed assured, was Nobel Prize-winning stuff. Then he got the prettiest of the schoolgirls to stand up and do the same – with his expert guidance, wholly predictably. Oh God... it all was really so very excruciating.

As was the food. Charles's steak was pretty fair, but my miserable little bits of overcooked chicken breast (done teriyaki style, and to hell with plain grilled) were shameful – even somehow managing to be cold. There were piles of fried onions, quite as retch-making as the ones that wait over Hampstead Funfair. Thank God then for the special fried rice – not normally the highlight of any meal – which was flavoursome and sticky in a good way, though in a pitifully small bowl. And by this time you're dreaming about not so much a proper plate of food with all the ingredients on the same plate at the same time, and not just morsels shovelled at you periodically on the whim of a chef, or else thrown up in the air so that you can catch them in your gob like a performing bloody seal... no, not so much

all that as just a bit of air.

Because all this time you are sitting around a hotplate the size of a snooker table – and quite apart from the blast furnace effect, this is a very ugly greasy and stained looking thing to be the focal point of dinner.

The schoolgirls had wisely legged it by this time – maybe for a nightcap in McDonald's, where the action really is – and by 9pm there were just four people remaining in the restaurant and about twice that many waiters and chefs scowling and loafing about.

Now puddings were, of course, going to be a joke, but I thought, well, okay: I could do with a joke. So let us see... what have we here...? "Wasabi ice cream. It's new! It's marvellous!". Maybe here is satire and the joke's on us.

We decided to share an ice cream tempura, for some quite delirious reason ("my absolute favourite!" crowed the waiter) which turned out to be two small cylinders of vanilla wrapped in a muffler of Mr Kipling sponge cake, the whole liberally coated with cold and coagulated batter – nothing light or crisp about this tempura baby.

Did we want tea or coffee? God no – we wanted to get out of there fast: the staff looked as if they felt the same way, poor devils. So we passed through again the huge and empty bar, seemingly untouched for the past 30 years, where the greeter – having no greeting to do – stood alone at the centre of the room watching a football match on a very large TV set. Oh dear, oh dear – what a place. "It's... uneasy," is what Charles said – and it is, among very many other things. One of them being quite comically expensive: all these little dribs and drabs I have described (one glass of wine, one glass of beer) came to nearly 80 quid. Service not included.

So I think, on balance, that to enjoy this place you have either to be quite hopelessly drunk, or else 11 years old. But here again comes the battering question: who on earth could ever contemplate coming here twice?

❑ *Joseph Connolly's latest novel is Love Is Strange (Faber and Faber, £7.99). All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.*

Lovely summer tip: try sipping the light fantastic

THREE new letters have joined the list of abbreviations I use in wine tasting notes: LSW.

They stand for Lovely Summer Wine, the kind of glassful that is right with an outdoor lunch, on a picnic, as an aperitif on a warm evening or even alongside a barbecue.

That's a pretty broad spectrum, but there are limits to the wines which fit. For me, LSWs need to have lightness and delicacy (even reds), plenty of fragrance and a crisp character which repays being served cool (again, even reds).

Ideally, too, there shouldn't be a knock-out level of alcohol – and beware, drinking wines cool disguises their alcoholic power until, perhaps, it's too late.

Those letters appeared quite frequently during the spring round of major high street retailers' tastings, so here to start with are some the white stars

(more whites, plus pinks and reds will follow in further columns). All are 2009 vintage, unless otherwise stated. They're listed by retailer, but do consider walking through more than one shop door.

Majestic (remember, there's a minimum six-bottle purchase and many of these prices apply only on two or more bottles of the same wine): Stella Alpino pinot grigio, perfumed aperitif from Italy's Alto Adige slopes, £8; Domaine de la Tourmaline muscadet, zesty and rich-fruit-filled, £6; Domaine Guillaume Cabrol Picpoul de Pinet Prestige, complex crisp appeal from an increasingly fashionable southern French grape, £7; Domaine Sainte Rose Le Vent du Nord 2008, £6, and Le Marin Blanc, £7, the first light, luscious and long, the second an intriguing alternative to burgundy from marsanne and roussanne grapes – as is Chateau de Pennautier

chardonnay Terroirs d'Altitude 2008, £7.

Finally, three different, delicious sauvignons: Domaine des Rabichattes pouilly fume, £11; the Kiwi Saint Clair Block 19 Bird Block, £12, and a top summer bargain Errazuriz from Chile, £5.

From Waitrose, another attractive Loire sauvignon, Champteloup, is £5.50 until July 6, or try the Loire's other classic white grape, chenin, in two fine examples: ripe, fresh Les Andides, £7, and stylish La Grille barrel-fermented Chateau de la Rouliere, £8, (both £2 off July 7 – August 3). Cave de Lugny Macon-Villages is decent entry-level burgundy, £7, or push the boat out for Domaine Gerard Thomas 2008 Saint-Aubin Les Combes, £19. More happy glassfuls are four aromatic Gascon bargains, Cuvee Pecheur, £4, Pujalet, £5, Domaine de

Planterieu, £5.50, and Duc de Vendome 2008 Saint Mont, £7 – interest and character rise with price. Antipodean sauvignons are good: Waitrose Villa Maria, £8.80, The Ned, £9, and Nepenthe, £8.50 – and fly the flag of St George with flowery, fragrant Chapel Down Bacchus, £9.50.

Oddbins has plenty of delights, too (prices are at the mixed dozen level, 20pc down from the single-bottle cost). Choice sauvignons include Le Haut Chesneau Touraine, £5.60, and Sancerre Les Chavrieres, £10.40, but look further afield: to Austria for the ripe, fruity, approachable Gruner Veltliner Groovey Salomon, £6.40; classic apricot Spanish albarino from Burgans, £8.80; and, from Australia, length, complexity and lots of interest in the viognier/marsanne d'Arenberg The Hermit Crab 2008, £8.80,

and the marsanne, chardonnay and roussanne 3 Amigos 2007, £10.40.

At Sainsbury's, all these gained the LWS commendation: Rully 2008, £10, rounded and crisp; Taste the Difference Muscadet Sevre et Maine,

£6.30; Sancerre La Porte du Caillou, £11; and a bargain to end with, easy, fruit-filled but proper wine, Sainsbury's Sicilian white, £3.66.

Just hope the weather holds...

LIZ SAGUES

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HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

❑ Here's a good job to do in the summer – get your roof checked over. This will be a good time to call a roofer out as they are usually not as busy at this time of year. Get them to check things over and make any recommendations they feel are necessary. This will give you time to get a second opinion too as opposed to getting a roofer in the winter, which is not an easy thing to do.

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