

D'OH! That's very often the first reaction you'll receive if you ever come out with the word 'Simpson's' – just as if you say 'Homer'. I don't imagine many are thinking The Iliad. But once you have established that it is the very venerable restaurant Simpson's you are talking about, then people are sure to say this: "Oh God yes – Simpson's-in-the-Strand: lovely old place, marvellous, one of my favourites – haven't been there for twenty years". Or 30.

One bloke I spoke to thought it could be 40. Crumbs. So if it's so very famous, fine and adored, I got to thinking, but no one has actually been there since they were wearing loon pants, how in the world is the place holding up? Well as I haven't been there for 20 years, I thought it was time to find out.

I was going there with Max, my chum who grew up in Hampstead and now spends a fair part of the year shivering in Winnipeg. He adores London, and whenever he is here he rather favours the few remaining traditional and unspoiled pockets of it – so where better? He said that he first went to Simpson's not in loon pants but short trousers – and not because he was hot, but because he was 10. And when was his most recent visit ...? He had a think: "About 20 years ago, I'd say".

Simpson's is fronted by a very grand and imposing archway entrance flanked by two great polished brass plaques proclaiming it to be the 'Grand Divan' – this leading me to wonder whether Japanese and Americans (who predictably adore the place) might assume that by way of a digestif they could be in for a strenuous bout of three-in-a-bed romping. Or maybe that's just me.

Next to Simpson's is The Savoy, still all boarded up and looking very sad. It was meant to reopen a year ago, following a trillion-dollar refit, but this September is the latest projected date, and even that seems optimistic. I used to love the Grill Room, before it was bugged up by Gordon Ramsay – although I always considered the much vaunted American Bar to be very overrated: rather cramped and tatty, really, and horribly expensive.

Anyway – that's The Savoy, and next to it is The Coal Hole, a large authentic Victorian pub with a superb listed interior, and that's where Max and I had arranged

Carving up traditional meaty fare is a delight

Many wax lyrical about Simpson's but few seem to visit that often. So after a 20-year absence, **Joseph Connolly** decides it's time to return with an old friend to see how it's holding up

Joseph Connolly faces up to the carvers at Simpson's in The Strand.



to meet for a pre-dinner bracer. But my dear ...! The people! The noise! All unbelievably voluble, overweight and wearing t-shirts, and a lot of them seemingly angry.

So no to The Hell Hole – Coal Hole, sorry – and across the road to the Strand Palace Hotel, which is fine if you enjoy drinking overpriced Australian wine in a 1970s airport.

And so, eventually, to Simpson's. It's hard to believe that all it is is a restaurant – the lofty colonnades, hall and staircase with a hovering of dinner-suited fellows in attendance suggest at the least a grand hotel. The dining room itself is just as you remember. "Ah!" said Max, "The smell hasn't changed. Possibly because the carpet hasn't". But he meant it kindly: the smell is of roasting beef, polish and permanence with a tynote of the last whiff of Empire.

Its history is indeed illustrious – originally opened in 1828 as The Grand Cigar Divan, a coffee house and chess club, the booth we were sitting in (and these

are the seats to aim for) formed from the original high-backed upholstered settles, and jolly comfortable too.

The room is huge, its dark oak panelling and mantel set off with richly carved swags in the manner of Grinling Gibbons, the enormous crystal chandeliers suspended from a yellow and white deeply coffered ceiling sparking light from the full-length mirrors and silver, allowing us to bask in a mellow sort of opulent security. Some, of course, will see all this as just fusty – an embarrassing relic: if you are one of them, you really mustn't go.

The large menu (called the Bill of Fare, rather endearingly) is printed on the reverse of a famous H.M. Bateman cartoon of Simpson's filled with horrified chefs and diners as the out-of-towner enquires whether the beef is English or Foreign.

These days it's Scotch, actually, but let it pass. It's the sort of menu that offers this: 'roasted wood pigeon breast, green beans, new potatoes and bacon'. As a starter. Dear God, you won't starve here: the a la

carte is expensive (although there are fixed price set lunches) but the quality is high, the quantity large. Max said he was kicking off with the pan fried veal kidney in a cream mustard sauce, which I couldn't immediately locate on the menu. "Where is the kidney ...?" I asked him.

"One each side of your back," he riposted, sharp as a whip. I had potted shrimps, which were just as they should be: a soft, thick and un-cold big mound with endive and hot toast smeared with olive oil. Max got six kidneys which he pronounced divine "with a faint tang of urine". Now look – I don't do offal, but he assures me that this is a good thing. And now to the stars of the show: the trolley of 28-day aged beef, and the trolley of roasted saddle of lamb. These are just two of what Simpson's terms its signature dishes, along with suckling pig, Dover sole, Beef Wellington, lobster soup and steak and kidney (both pudding and pie). The waiter took our order – one beef, one lamb – with evident approval. The staff are a delight – none, except for the

FACTFILE

❑ SIMPSON'S-IN-THE-STRAND WC2R 0EW

- ❑ Open for breakfast Monday to Friday 7.15am-10.30am. Lunch Monday-Friday 12.15-2.45pm, Sunday 12.15-3pm. Dinner Monday-Saturday 5.45-10.45pm. Sunday 6-9pm.
- ❑ Food: ★★★★★★☆☆
- ❑ Service: ★★★★★★☆☆
- ❑ Cost: Set lunch £25 for two courses, £30 for three. Or about £140 for three courses

patrician front-of-house, British, but somehow appearing to enter into the spirit of it all. They wear claret-coloured bolero jackets, except for one smallish chap in black tails that were rather too large for him, who I thought might be about to scream for Mr Grimsdale!

They're all very good at their job – smiling, attentive, but never intrusive; you order a jug of tap water and they bring ice and a plate of lime and lemon slices. There is also a charming young woman in plunging pink who softly tinkles out all of your favourites on a vast and glossy grand piano. There is a long-standing tradition here that you always tip the carver: the money – £2, say – is discreetly left on the table. I glanced around the restaurant: it was full.

Lots of groups of white-haired women – regulars who would know this. White-haired couples who also would. The rest were Japanese and Americans who probably knew too because of all the guidebooks where Simpson's features strongly. So all in all, our brace of carvers in their whites and toques (one for each silver-domed trolley) were going to be doing all right. Simpson's actually offers a course in carvery:

90 minutes for £150 to include a carving set and lunch.

Fair enough if you're tackling a turkey or a giant rib, I suppose – but our fellows were just cutting boneless joints with razor-like knives: I might even have managed it myself. And the meat ...? Beyond description perfect. Max had five (count 'em) enormous slices of melting lamb – far too much for the plate, but not for our Max – with homemade mint and recurrant sauces. My beef was even finer: you didn't need even to chew it, and the gravy was sublime. Yorkshire pud and homemade horseradish, of course.

And we both had little copper skillets of good and crunchy Savoy cabbage (they used to ruin the greens here, but no longer) and roast potatoes which were really the only letdown: cardboardy, with no discernible flavour. But the very good 2009 New Zealand Pinot Noir valiantly took up the slack.

Even Max had no room for pudding – although I saw him eyeing the 'Simpson's treacle sponge with Madagascar vanilla bean custard'. We shared some cheese, and Norman Wisdom in his tails apologised for the lack of a trolley. "It is under repair. There was an accident." I sympathised. "Many killed ...?" And on the list ... no Stilton! "Ah," he said, "but I can arrange it ..." Odd, hey? But pretty good, when it came. All Old England, then, at its very finest. But afterwards we were forced to re-emerge into New England, curse it – and there was the Strand, awash with unbelievably voluble and overweight people in t-shirts, a lot of them seemingly angry. So farewell then, Simpson's and civilisation. D'oh!

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

Fine rose wine is in the pink for summer



WINE writing and theatre criticism have much in common – there's a lot of personal taste involved, so just as you follow a theatre critic whose views you know will fit in with what you enjoy watching, you need to find a wine writer whose palate matches yours.

And today's column, I fear, may not be universally popular. My second tranche of lovely summer wines are roses – and it's there that I'm particularly opinionated.

Regular readers will already know that my pink preferences are pale in colour, crisp and tending to delicate savouriness rather than in-you-face fruity sweetness. So if the latter is your style, skip these suggestions and try again next

week, when my suggested summery reds might better suit your palate.

For everyone still reading, here are some roses which I've liked at recent tastings, retailer by retailer (all 2009 vintage).

Just to prove that I believe there's fine rose beyond Provence, let's start at Marks & Spencer, with a very, very appealing aperitif or food wine, La Prendina, from the Cavalchina estate near Lake Garda (£7.50).

Pinot grigio is in the blend, but the largest part is rondinella, a grape important in Bardolino and Valpolicella, so there's a fresh cherry character in the glass – delicious.

Majestic also has a pale and pretty Cavalchina wine, Bardolino Chiaretto, (£7), in a

strong pink line-up (prices are for a minimum of two bottles). Others I liked included La Grille pinot noir, Loire (£6), Commanderie de Peyrassol, Provence (£8) and the slightly deeper coloured and flavoured Chateau de Sours, Bordeaux, excellent value at £7 (until July 19). Sainsbury's offers the little but equally accomplished sister of the last wine, Domaine de Sours (£6.60), summer in a glass that lingers most attractively.

Sainsbury's Cuvee Prestige Cotes du Rhone (£4.70) is pleasant, too.

Quite the finest rose when Waitrose showcased its summer wines was the complex, fascinating, lingering Domaine Lafran-Veyrolles Bandol (£14, from Waitrose Wine Direct and a few top branches), but Esprit

de Baganay, Provence (£6.30, to July 27), Torres San Medin, Chile (£7.30) and Da Luca, Puglia (£5.25, to July 27) all have delicacy and crisp appeal.

With a 20 per cent discount on 12 bottles, I'd find it easy to fill a case at Oddbins: Cabaret, Provence (£7.20 – this and following prices are after discount), Domaine Villargeau Coteaux de Giennois (£8) and Maguelonne Coteaux de l'Ardeche (£8) offer zesty fruit with, in the Cabaret, a pleasant hint of spice.

Leaving the high street for a moment, there is one particular pink from Laithwaites (www.laithwaiteswine.co.uk) which I can't recommend too strongly. Delice des Rois (£8) is made from pineau d'aunis, a grape whose wines have been exported

from the Loire Valley to England since the 13th century – it was a favourite of Henry Plantagenet – but is rarely seen now. It's pale, light, elegant, thirst-quenchingly dry and with a distinctive touch of pepperness, wonderful with food – a summer delight.

Finally, if you're looking for a softer, slightly off-dry but still refreshing pink, think rose d'Anjou from the Loire Valley. There's plenty about, and most is very quaffable (though do serve it very cool).

Prices have gone up, as they have – justifiably – for so many wines, but you should find a decent bottle for as little as £4 (Sainsbury's), £4.90 (Waitrose, to July 27) and £6 M&S and Majestic (La Grille).

