

Sea Shell, ma belle...

ALFIE'S Antique Emporium – along with Hampstead's own mini-version in Heath Street – is one of the great survivors. And as is the way with long-term survivors, it does by its very nature of course seem pretty old and fusty, but in a rather glorious, time-warped and almost magisterial sort of a way.

Still it smells and looks like the 1960s and 1970s in there, some of the stallholders seemingly having never troubled since those halcyon days to shift themselves out of their cramped little chromium chairs, while still they continue to struggle with the changeover to decimalisation.

Interestingly, the 1960s and 1970s – along with the 1930s and 1950s – now collectively form the majority of the stock. The 18th and 19th centuries have thoroughly given way to art deco, then a motley of quirky coffee tables shaped like an artist's palette with brass ferrules on their spindly and tapered little legs, with even the odd rare item of Beatles memorabilia. Such as a 1963 small yellow cardboard box sporting crude but affectionate portraits of the Fabs, and housing fifty little sachets of 'Beatles Highest Quality Hair Pomade'. This was made in the Philippines, of all places on earth, and each of the sachets was sold individually – in the US only – at 10 cents apiece. Ironic that it should be a gluey pomade, The Beatles not being noted at the time for short, neat Brillantined and smarmed down Fred Astaire hairstyles.

So there it was, this box, huddled shyly into a glass case alongside a Babycham chamois and some early Bakelite eggcups. So I bought it. I couldn't think of a reason not to: look, you don't come across a carton of 1963 Filippino Beatles Highest Quality Hair Pomade every day of the week, do you? Well quite. And there's another set-up there we looked in on – it's called, very fabulously, The Girl Can't Help It, and specialises in original vintage American glamorous duds for women. My wife bought a little 1950s cocktail hat with a veil. I know. And we were both of us stone cold sober: honest.

But that's rather the fun of antique emporia, isn't it really? As in life, you never know what you're going to encounter. Rather less fun for the people who run the stalls though, I imagine. I know of what I speak: I served my stretch in The Flask Bookshop in Flask Walk (about 14 years, little chance of parole and no talk of time off) either, this almost certainly due to my lack of good behaviour). It's lovely selling cherished old things

... these are words that go together well – or at least quite well – with some rare Beatles memorabilia and a portion of rock, writes **Joseph Connolly**

when you're actually selling them – but sitting alone and marooned among them for days on end while eyeing with resentment the passing could-be punters apparently all very foolishly eager to spend their money not on first editions and fine bindings but fripperies such as, I don't know ... food, say ... well that can be dissipating indeed. In Alfie's, some of the more obviously stir-crazy inmates will engage you in desperate and increasingly delirious conversation: you feel you ought to be slipping them some snout or a file inside a cake – fill them in on how that Profumo and Christine Keeler affair all panned out in the end. Others are slumped, and faintly angry – silently defying you to even so much as think of enquiring the price of something.

Anyway, it was fun – as is the whole of Church Street, actually. Rather more gentrified than I remembered it, but down at the other end the street market is still in full swing (some stalls, very encouragingly, selling fruit and veg by the 'lb'), as is a shop called One Price (which is daft because they've actually got thousands of different ones) which appears to run to absolutely everything you ever might need during the total span of your life on earth.

The street even sports a smart public lavatory, all tricked out in Tudoresque beams, and rather like Shakespeare's Birthplace. But it was actually around the corner in Lisson Grove that we were going to eat: I'd planned it all a couple of days before when in a taxi I'd whizzed past the famous fish place The Sea Shell, and for the first time in how long it wasn't all boarded up since that wholly disastrous and gutting fire: for lo, there was the familiar queue snaking down the road.

So we wandered down there on this very sticky afternoon – and guess bloody what? The takeaway was open, oh yes, and doing its customary bumper trade. But the restaurant at the back ...? Up to its knees in builders.

"We'll be gone in a week," one said. Yes well – that's no good to



FACTFILE

**THE SEA SHELL,
49-51 Lisson Grove, NW1
Tel: 020-7224 9000**

Restaurant and Takeaway
open Mon – Fri 12-2.30 pm;
5-10.30pm. Sat 12-10.30pm.
Closed Sun.
FOOD: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
SERVICE: I did it myself, and
brilliantly.
COST: Under £25 for one
course for two with soft
drink. More or less double in
the restaurant, plus service
and, presumably, booze.

me, is it? I'm hungry now. And thirsty. And hot. So I made a swift executive decision: we'll get a takeaway and eat it at one of the very few little tables they've got around the side. So: haddock fillet for me, rock salmon for my wife – both with chips and mushy peas. "I'd like a beer," she said. Yes well you can't: no licence. The drink list, very depressingly, stretched to Coke, Diet Coke, Sprite and Fanta. So we had water: sparkling Springbourne 'drawn deep from volcanic hills in Montgomeryshire', now making a rare personal appearance in Lisson Grove.

"Do you have glasses?" I asked the girl. "Yes," she said. Well no, actually – a Coca-Cola paper cup. Which sat rather well with the plates made out of reconstituted egg-box and the very lightweight plastic cutlery, designed with the hands of a four year-old in mind.

At £6, haddock and cod were the cheapest things on the menu – this always rather amazed me. Rock salmon was £7.50. It's nothing to do with salmon, of course – when it comes, it looks like a severely barnacled side of whale, though it's actually shark: dogfish, by name. It has a strongish flavour – I don't like it much, but my wife does because it reminds her of childhood Fridays when the local chippy was frying Tonight and it was all a very exciting treat.

And also because you can't apparently get it at Waitrose.

The mushy peas were science-fiction green and glowing and came in a white plastic lidded pot of the sort that a nurse might leave with you to do what you can with. All the food was steaming hot, and so were we: picture us then with the remorseless sun, squatting in a side street off a busy main road with Toyland knives and forks, not to say a table in the grip of a tremendous bout of delirium tremens.

The haddock was huge, though – utterly fresh, and very good indeed. The batter was not quite crispy enough, and nor were the chips – a pity, actually, as they were very proper chips; they might well have benefited from a dusting of Sarson's, but in the light of

all else I adjudged that a bridge too far. The lemon wedges were appreciated, and I was justified in my conviction that the extra cost of 20p for ketchup would prove to be a sound investment.

There's a school playground opposite, continually alive with the barely muted hysteria and occasional shriek of could be delight, might be terror, that all such places are prone to. Break seemed to go on for just about ever – and then came the sonorous clang of a hand-held bell, this making me feel that now I ought to jump up, sling on my satchel and race off to double biology. But no – I finished the lunch, and I must say it all had been pretty enjoyable. But here's a thing about prices: by the time you read this, I daresay the restaurant part will be open for business – but expect to pay not much less than double the takeaway prices. Plus service, of course. This is good to know, and goes a long way to explaining the constant queues for the takeaway side of things.

And so ended the most informal lunch I've had in ages: not the sort of lunch you'd really put on a cocktail hat for – and nor was I moved to make myself spruce with a sachet of Filippino Highest Quality Pomade.

□ Joseph Connolly's novel Summer Things is published by Faber and Faber (£7.99). All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed at www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

You want me to do what with the red wine, sir?

FOR years, people in the know have argued the case for serving summery red wine cool. Not as cold as whites or dessert wines, but well below 21st century room – or sunny patio – temperature. But it has been an uphill struggle.

I remember several occasions in decent restaurants in France where a request that a warm-to-the-touch bottle of Loire red, for example, would benefit from a few minutes in an ice bucket was met with Gallic eyebrows raised to hairline level. Now, though, things are different, to the extent that wine PRs send out specific lists of need-to-cool reds.

Let's consider one bottle: Louis Latour Morgon les Charmes 2009, a cru beaujolais from a very fine vintage. Well cooled, it's the essence of lovely summer wine: crisp, light, stylishly refreshing. But, interestingly, it's more than that. Let it warm up a little (though still well below the ambient we've been enjoying lately) and its character changes.

The aromatics increase and the wine becomes more serious and structured, with a mouth-watering cherry and mineral edge, much more reflecting its particular beaujolais terroir. So, two LSW bottles in one. That particular wine has not yet reached the shops, but Majestic has the 2008 (£10). It's not as good a vintage and I haven't tasted it, but coming from such a big, respected name as Latour it should be very pleasant.

Similar interest is likely to be found in other reds which have a summery appeal. I've highlighted the Morgon, however, because I had a sample bottle, which I could assess in far more realistic conditions – I could actually drink it! – than the rapid sniff, swirl, spit of a 60-bottle-plus press tasting.

Nonetheless, here are some more attractive reds

to serve cool, gleaned from those tastings. Still at Majestic, La Grille pinot noir 2008 is a perfumed, fresh bargain (two-plus bottles, £6), while Villa Maria Celler Selection 2008 expresses

the grape much more substantially, long and very drinkable despite the 14pc alcohol (£10 if you buy two Kiwi bottles). There's an excellent range of Cotes du Rhone, too – my pick is Clos de Mont-Olivet 2007 (two-plus, £7.50).

Oddbins has a juicy, good value red burgundy, Domaine des Marechaudes 2007 (£8), the intensely perfumed organic Coteaux du Tricastin Domaine Mas Theo 2007 (£7.20), and the very fine Langhe nebbiolo 2008 (£12.80). All prices are in a mixed case.

A Loire delight, full of flavour, concentrated and excellent value, at Sainsbury's is Domaine du Colombier Chinon 2008 (£6). Summer's best bargain is at M&S, Vin de Pays de l'Ardeche gamay 2009, bright-fruited and easy (£4), or for more character and style Les Orris rouge 2007 (£8) is unusual and appealing.

Waitrose has a bargain challenge, too, the very-reliable Gran Lopez Tinto 2009 (£4.80), or there's more weight and a pleasant herbiness in Chateau de Caraguihes Corbieres 2007 (£8).

And if you haven't yet joined The Wine Society (www.thewinesociety.com) here are three highly-recommended reasons for doing so: The Society's French full red (£4.95), Poderi Colla Barbera d'Alba, cherries and so much more (£8.50), and Dog Point pinot noir, class, complexity and length from New Zealand (£18.50).

LIZ SAGUES



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HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

□ If the water pressure is very poor in your shower, it may be due to limescale build-up. If you live in a hard water area, you should clean your shower heads every three months or so. If the scale is too bad, it may be an idea to get either a new hose or a new shower head.