

Unless you like dumplings, don't Czech this place out

Rumoured to be awful, **Joseph Connolly** braved a 'traditional' Eastern European restaurant for a, er, unique experience

THE last time I was in Prague was not that long after the Czech Republic had cast off the yoke of Communist tyranny and oppression, etc etc, and still was wide-eyed at its hard-won freedom.

The very air, said one old woman with tears in her eyes, suddenly was sweet again. A great deal of the greyness lingered on, however – and certainly the air was notable for a distinct lack of sweetness if you happened to be loitering anywhere within sniffing distance of the average restaurant: deep fried dumplings and potato pancakes were the order of the day, though what they were fried in, few cared to wonder.

Their fine beer – Budweiser Budvar, not to be confused with the Yankee fizz of the same name – was absurdly cheap: pennies per bottle, here being the foundation stone for the appalling edifice that now is made up of wall-to-wall British stag weekends and hen nights not to say more general benders and mayhem.

They have little but contempt for us in Prague, these days – and when you see what they have to contend with in this beautiful city, it's little wonder. The other drunken lure is the legality of absinthe, the wormwood pastis said to rot the brain (hard to quantify or verify in the case of the marauding British contingent, of course, due to their inherent advantage in that particular department).

Anyway – the food then was dreadful: vast portions of stodge, dubious and heavily disguised meats, oleaginous cheesy sauces (to cloak all evil) and a red wine called Jesus Christ. This altar wine was the best on offer, despite being more suited to fuel an old-style Ronson lighter. Some French wine was available at a price not that shy of an apartment just off Wenceslas Square.

So when I was asked if I would care to relive the experience in a Czech club in West Hampstead, I said no, not really. I had been invited by the Foodman who writes for A Local Newspaper Whose Title Eludes Me. Then he said "It's rumoured to be perfectly awful – you simply must come". And oddly I heard myself agreeing on the spot, such willingness for suffering maybe something that I ought to be worried about.

So off we went, with respective spouses, to a large residential house in West End Lane, just around the corner from Compayne Gardens. There's some confusion about quite what it's called: a swing sign above a life-size model of a one-handed French chef says 'Czechoslovak Bar & Restaurant', though its official name is Czech Club Restaurant. On the door (with



Open for business ... Joseph outside the 'hostel-like' Czechoslovak Restaurant.

one stoved in glass panel) it states that the restaurant is 'Open to Non-Residents'. "So it is a club, then," I said to the unsmiling greeter. He glared. "No". "But people do live here, yes? A sort of a hostel?" He glared. "No". Well it sure does look like a sort of a hostel – or a boarding house, maybe, cobbled together in 1954 on a shoestring.

There's a noticeboard in the hall covered in news and studenty ads. The chokingly dull front dining room has dull mud-coloured flock papered walls with dull gold panelling and the quintessential 1954 dull – but

still quite horribly energetic – hotel carpet, as designed by a lunatic. There is a (probably Bohemian) crystal chandelier with a dozen lightbulbs, a good three of which were actually working – though grudgingly, as if they too were teetering on the edge of packing it in altogether.

So the four of us sat on non-sense dull wooden chairs at a dull gate-leg table surveying the book-like menu, taking in the white plastic tablecloth, the small white paper napkins – virtually transparent, actually, like the old Bronco lavatory roll

– and what I thought was a single dying gerbera in a bud vase, but which turned out to be an artificial gerbera, weighed down under the dust of ages. Only one other table was taken – students seduced by the low prices: they had scrambled eggs on toast and cans of fizzy drinks. One said "I hate Dr Pepper – it's disgusting". Another said "Really? It's one of my favourite albums".

And so, dear Lord, to the food. On each successive page of the laminated menu, the dishes appear to get heartier – culminating, I imagine, in the very heartiest: a coronary you

FACTFILE

☐ CZECHOSLOVAK RESTAURANT

74 West End Lane, NW6.
Tel 020-7372 1193.

☐ Closed Mon. Tues – Sun 5-10pm.

☐ Food: ★★★★★★★★★★

☐ Service: ★★★★★★★★★★

☐ Cost: Yes well, rather a great deal – about £60 for two, for three courses with wine or beer. Or have the fried sausage with a few chips and save a packet. Or don't go.

it was malformed – thick then thin – the gravel-like breadcrumb coating covering all manner of gristle and worse. Dry as dust. The meat itself? Well – was it meat? Presumably. Could have been carpet. My wife had a deep-fried potato pancake (she just won't listen ...) with stir-fry pork and creamed spinach: a delicious imagination at work in the kitchen, there. It resembled an explosion and was leaden: sort of tasty bits, apparently, but only picked at.

Foodman, for reasons he struggled to explain, had ordered a sirloin steak within yet another bleeding potato pancake: it was criminally overcooked – thin, grey and arid, though weirdly ultimately slimy: not good at all, and abandoned. Mrs Foodman fared the best of us with a beef goulash, though this dish was actually meagre – amid a sea of gargantuan helpings, half a loaf of unbidden bread and complimentary (guess what?) dumplings the size of a King Edward.

And then the waiter conveyed to us so crushing a disappointment: for pudding, he regretted to say, there were no apricot dumplings! Lord in heaven – how to cope? Well with a sundae for all to share: nothing ice cream, frozen strawberries (in July!) and shaving lather. Or squirry cream, who's to say? Oh dear oh dear ... On the website it says that this restaurant offers 'a unique and satisfying experience for a visitor wanting to enjoy traditional Czech Slovak cuisine'. And that's accurate, I'm afraid – apart, obviously, from the 'satisfying' bit.

It goes on to say that the place 'remain unchanged today to the original style and décor' (sic). Well right again – but while I'm all for conservation, some things really ought to be changed, you know. Like babies, say – or else look what you're left with.

Postscript: they don't take credit or debit cards, only cash. Not even czeques.

☐ *SUMMER THINGS* is a novel about ill-fated summer holidays, by Joseph Connolly (Faber and Faber £7.99). All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk

don't walk away from. You want dumplings and potato pancakes ...? Well no you don't, of course – not if you're sane – but hell, they were difficult to avoid. But I managed: fried sausage for a starter, others opting for boiled sausage (ringing those changes), chicken broth and – yes – a potato pancake (made with 'grinded potato', it said). My sausage was like a truncheon as wielded by a Bow Street Runner, though infinitely tastier – slashed in crisscrosses, conceivably with a sabre, and with the consistency of frankfurter, the taste of salami.

Like a fool, I didn't finish it, conscious of the heaviness to come: that sausage turned out to be the easy highlight, damn and blast it. The boiled one was okay, apparently – the soup was just okay, and the pancake was just okayish. Foodman had also ordered brawn on the grounds that he makes it himself with calves' feet, which then he clarifies: this stuff was claggy and simply nasty, is what he said.

The wine, mercifully, was not Jesus Christ but Georges Duboeuf – a simple and gluggable Vin de Pays d'Oc from the King of Beaujolais, and a true bargain at £14 in that we drank it, you see, while a lot of the equally reasonably priced food went largely uneaten.

I had hog schnitzel. I know. But I love the Wiener schnitzel as conjured by The Wolseley, so why not try the wild boar variety? Shall I count the reasons ...? Well because I wasn't in The Wolseley for a bloody start. And

URBANSOLUTIONS

SMARTER PROPERTY MAINTENANCE

HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

☐ Before employing a tradesman, be clear what you want done first. You don't need to know the technical ins and outs but if you can describe the end result then it will be easier for the builder or plumber to quote first. This will in turn make it easier for you to compare quotes, before deciding on who to employ.

www.urbansolutions.co.uk 020-7435 1111