

THE old British Rail red and white logo still sits proud atop a galvanised post outside the very dilapidated Hampstead Heath station. Nothing seems to change much, down this way – the Magdala Tavern still looks pubby and still is sporting its Ruth Ellis bulletholes, Rumbolds is still comfortably on the corner, and the winos still are uproarious and ruby-coloured, upending their brown paper-wrapped two litre bottles of paint stripper and adding so very much gaiety to the council's prettification of South End 'Green'.

The looming hulk of the Royal Free Hospital, of course, renders an elephant in the room hardly more than a subtle little knick-knack – but apart from that, it's all quite villagey and pleasingly old-fashioned. And yes I know they axed the Post Office, but I'm trying to be positive here.

When I was no more than but an infant, I especially loved this little corner of Hampstead – not for Keats, not for the Ponds, but for the tree-lined gravel boulevard that led up to the funfair. I didn't much care for the fair itself – I was scared of the big rides, bored by the small ones, never won the massive glass jar of Pascall sherbert lemons with its rubber-banded ten shilling note on the hoop-la stand, never speared three aces with the darts and the rifle barrels I was convinced were as bent as the stallholder. Nor did I go for the great pink clouds of candy floss (if I wanted to gorge on lagging, I could always shin up into the loft) while the miasma of generator petrol and frying onions always made me gag. But one thing that could bring a smile to the lips of the miserable little bleeder that was me was this exciting shady avenue, chock full of stalls that actually sold things, as opposed to just dangling them enticingly before your eyes as potential prizes that you knew, when all your money was gone, you would never ever win.

So instead of chucking your sixpence into the unappeasable maw of some itinerant huckster, with a stall you were guaranteed a result. There was also a bloke with a dressed-up monkey, I recall, who would perch very terrifyingly on your shoulder (yes of course the monkey and

Garden was blooming lovely once I'd swapped

On a funny old day, **Joseph Connolly** relied on his wife's choices at Garden Gate and was pleasantly surprised



not the man – do get a grip) and you would try to grit your teeth and grin quite bravely as your photograph was taken. Never mind all that – the stalls were the thing: lots of old records, books, Indian daggers and bullwhips, plastic guitars and trumpets – and best of all, mountains of hats of every description. Cowboy and Robin Hood were great favourites, although one year I did acquire a very natty bowler. There was also a 'Guess Your Weight' set-up, and here was no risk to my tanner at all because I only ever weighed a very few stone (though these days, a fair few more) so they were always way out and then they had to give you a ring made of 'Rare and Genuine

Peruvian Gold'. These I thought were luscious, although later they disintegrated into dust.

Well there was none of all that the other day when I was down there with my wife – but we did have the Garden Gate, scene of a recent pedigree dog competition attended by Liam Gallagher and judged by his sister-in-law Natalie Appleton, the prize for Best in Show going to Roxy, a dachshund owned by Liam Gallagher and his wife Nicole Appleton. I'd never been here before, but the pub had come garlanded with praise from my son Charles, and I rapidly saw why: this place, with its large, very laid back and hotchpotch garden, is verily heaven for the younger crowd – and particularly

Refreshing ... Joseph samples his Guinness – despite preferring a glass of pinot grigio.

FACTFILE

- **GARDEN GATE**
14 South End Road, NW3
Tel 020-7435 4938
- Open every day, normal pub hours.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- Cost: Reasonable – a two course meal for two, with modest drink, for about £35. On Tuesday evenings the price of wine comes down as low as £7.95 the bottle.

the smokers among them.

It was a warm sunny lunchtime, so of course we were going to eat in the garden – but Lord, the stripling devotees of nicotine were truly out in force. It's funny – when smoking was legal inside a pub, you took the eye-stinging hit of it, the ashtray dead stink, as just part of the deal. Now, even in the open air, every secondhand lungful is a bit of an affront. But the largely student gang there that day were merrily downing the lager, the cider, the white wine and the tar and tannin cocktails for all the world as if they were free: thank God for the student loan, eh? Not much food was being eaten though, so we thought we'd redress the balance.

The menu – along with the wine list and ever-changing repertoire of real ales – is pretty extensive and rather good value – but although a blackboard in the garden offered 'bbqs' and 'hot roasts', neither was in evidence: maybe that's just for the weekends. I was dithering: didn't

know what to eat. My wife went for a special of the day: 'trout with crushed new potatoes and a simple Caesar salad and herb oil'. I didn't know what to eat. 'I'll have sausage and mash', I said. And my wife said "that's boring – have something unusual". "Your're right, you're right ... it's just that I don't know what to eat". So I chose the breaded chicken breast topped with tomato salsa and buffalo mozzarella, with new potatoes. And I had a half of Guinness in a Heineken glass, while my wife had a half of Peroni in a Peroni glass. They give you a big artificial gerbera in a bottle – not by way of an amuse bouche, but so that the waitress (who turned out to be very polite, very charming and very efficient) knew to which table to cart over your food.

I don't know ... It just must have been one of those days when I go a bit nuts. I wanted a shady table: there were 30, and I chose the one in full sun. Then I remembered that I don't like tomato salsa, nor buffalo mozzarella – and that I don't drink Guinness, having years ago decided that I didn't like that either. Dear Lord, what a mess. So I moaned about the sun, and looked about me. There's a long covered loggia – for the winter smokers, I suppose – decorated with old mirrors and truly dreadful pictures, which I hope is all meant to be amusing. Moaned about the sun a bit more.

The trout looked great – a large-ish fish with crisped up skin. The chicken thing looked all right as well, but of course I didn't like it. My wife, who knows me, offered to swap lunches – and I, being a gentleman, said okay. It was good, the trout – but riddled with tiny bones that could drive you insane. Potatoes excellent – Caesar salad rather heavy

handed: Parmesan generous, anchovy fillets rather large and slithery. The chicken was very flavoursome, I was told, if a bit on the tough and overdone side. I was still moaning about the sun, and my wife, who knows me, offered to swap places. "Stop wanting to suffer," I told her. "I don't want to suffer," she snapped back; "I just want you to stop". Didn't like the Guinness, predictably, although it was a perfectly decent Guinness. Got instead a glass of pinot grigio pink which wasn't pink but tasted pink, so that was all right.

We ordered a summer pudding and warm chocolate brownie with vanilla ice cream – but alas, the waitress regretted ... no summer pudding! Well damn. Okay – Eton mess, then. This came in a pint beer glass – which is more than everyone's beer did. While the heavy dimpled mug is now little more than a memory, ale seems to be served in vases, these days. Anyway, both puddings were extremely good – far too large, and therefore just perfect. It's a good, busy and friendly place, this – even though I did feel a bit like Mr Chips who had dodderingly wandered into the Junior Common Room. I also felt like I'd just sucked down a packet of Benson & Hedges, but let it lie.

Then we went to the beautifully laid out fruit stall outside the station and bought deep red Kentish cherries, watermelon and apricots the colour of Rare and Genuine Peruvian Gold. These I thought luscious – and, I am pleased to report, they later did not disintegrate into dust.

□ *It Can't Go On is a novel by Joseph Connolly (Faber and Faber, £7.99). All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.*

English quality a pleasure to drink



Award-winning ... Chapel Down Reserve Brut won a silver medal in this year's International Wine Challenge; right, Chapel Down Flint Dry was the star of the evening.

THIS is a column I'd never imagined I could write: a description of a highly successful dinner at which each one of the six courses was matched with an English wine.

At the beginning it was easy. English fizz is increasingly good, with the best of those growers who choose the traditional chardonnay and pinot grapes providing a serious challenge to their counterparts in Champagne. This time, though, the blend had an English edge, as rivaner and reichensteiner join pinot noir in Chapel Down Reserve Brut.

The wine won a silver medal in this year's International Wine Challenge and is a crisp, enjoyable aperitif, clean and aromatic.

Then things got more serious. Alongside a creamy, peppery watercress soup came a Becketts pinot auxerrois 2009 – a vintage as great here as in most of Europe. The grape is an Alsace

secret, no relation of the other pinots and instead rather closer to chardonnay. Discreetly scented, its depth of flavour comes as a happy surprise.

Next up were wild and cultivated mushrooms in puff pastry – whose sesame seed garnish worked particularly well with a'Becketts' 2009 rose, pinot noir with a touch of reichensteiner and domfelder, brightly coloured and juicily fruity.

The star wine of the evening was Chapel Down Flint Dry 2009, where the previous blend of bacchus, schonberger and huxelrebe is rounded by a big dollop of chardonnay. For years Flint Dry has been one of the best of English whites; now it's a classy wine, aromatic, complex and lingering, which could have come from any coolish classic wine region.

The food pairing was classic, too – fresh crab, lobster and prawns from the nearby

coast, with local samphire and flavoursome mayonnaise made with Sussex rapeseed oil and eggs from the cook's own hens. Bliss. By now you must have realised this didn't happen in London. But the food essentials were quality and freshness, and the principle is possible to follow anywhere.

Organic Tamworth pork loin fillet was the meat, Chapel Down rondo, regent and pinot noir the red wine. It's a delicate glassful, with good red fruit flavours and a gentle acidity to counter the fattiness of the pork.

A Sussex cheeseboard followed, well partnered by the ripe fruit and crisp finish of Chapel Down bacchus 2008, from a grape predicted to become as important here as the somewhat similar sauvignon blanc is in New Zealand.

Nectar, naturally, came last. This is Chapel Down's sweet wine, siegerrebe, ortega and bacchus, scented in a rather

English way and with intriguingly developing flavours unabashed by mint and lemon sorbet, strawberries and raspberries.

The experience was pleasurable proof of the burgeoning quality of English wine. Kent-centred Chapel Down is the UK's largest wine producer; a'Becketts, in Wiltshire, is at the other end of the scale, but both show expertise and style and hint at even better bottles to come.

Stockists and prices: Chapel Down: Vintage Reserve Brut (RRP £17), Waitrose, Selfridges, Majestic, Fortnum & Mason; Flint Dry 2009 (RRP £8),

Waitrose and Majestic; Rondo, Regent, Pinot Noir (RRP £13), a few Majestic stores; Bacchus 2008 and 2009 are sold out; Nectar 2009 now replaces 2007 (RRP £13, 50cl) from Chapel Down, 01580 763033 /www.englishwinesgroup.com. A'Becketts wines are best bought direct, 01380 816669 /abecketts.co.uk – pinot auxerrois 2009 £8, rose sold out.

Wines for the dinner I attended were supplied by Bush Vines, www.bushvines.co.uk, and food was by Nik Westacott, www.82fishbourne.co.uk.

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HOME TIP OF THE WEEK

□ For best results when sealing a bath or shower tray, fill the bath with water or weight down the shower tray as there may be some give when it is used. This will ensure that a good seal is made and the sealant won't become stretched.