

FORTY years ago, Camden Town was not famous for the Roundhouse, the Lock or Stables Market, and nor for the colourful and exhaustingly energetic explosion of touristy shops leading away from the station. Here was not a young and trendy, sought-after and media-savvy area, oh my God no. Forty years ago, Camden Town was famous only for being a dump – North London's most notorious don't-go-unless-you-have-to area jammed full of dosshouses and drunks – and where, as a consequence, beautiful if very run-down period terrace houses could be had for the proverbial song. Then the word went out – no doubt a desperate cry from the area's broke and increasingly hysterical estate agents – that the whole place was now officially 'coming up'. This was met with a good deal of ill-natured sniggering in NW3 because although it had long been true that people who could not afford to buy in Hampstead would quite happily settle for Belsize Park, there was no possibility that anyone who could not quite run to Belsize would even so much as consider Camden Town: they would have preferred Golders Green, which is quite a thought in itself.

Inverness Market on a Saturday was a bit of a draw: fresh fruit and veg, rotten fruit and veg, cameras and watches of dubious origin, books and magazines of dubious legality, and several stalls laden with mechanical detritus such as the innards of toasters, bits of locks, bicycle bells and eviscerated clocks – these always very carefully picked over by spooky and unsmiling men in gaberdine raincoats, all wearing spectacles which had probably been bought on a similar stall as a job lot along with their dentures. My mother and I would quite bravely go there at Christmas, in search of a very cheap tree. These were always soaked and trussed up and if you politely asked the stallholder to untie one, the better to assess its shape, he would hack out through his roll-up words you never heard in the Bible, and then threaten to shove said bleeding Christmas tree where the sun don't shine, cock. Which was nice.

I'd forgotten all about the market until just the other day, when I found myself back there with my wife. There's an extraordinary collection of shops and eating places, not to say the Mecca Bingo Hall (and I'm amazed that the proprietors escape being cursed as infidel dogs prior

My, how times have changed in Camden

Forty years ago, the Town was a no go area for anyone who lived in Hampstead, writes **Joseph Connolly**. Now, The Camden Brasserie – with its casual upmarketness and arty intentions – shows it's worth venturing in



"A damn good lunch" ...
Joseph Connolly at
The Camden Brasserie.

to suffering the place being blown to kingdom come). There's Mega City Comics (American stuff) and Out On The Floor, packed with old and collectable LPs. A Spanish tapas place offers – every Monday, rather oddly – live flamenco dancing (and still I struggle to imagine the dead sort). The stalls themselves are only rather diluted versions of the fabulous cluster of shops around the corner where the currently hot togs seem to range between vampire and Sergeant Pepper, by way of Satan, Minnie Mouse and Mad Men. The other thing that Inverness Market has got is Hâché – a reputedly superior hamburger joint, and that's where we were headed for lunch. It's just next to a tattoo and piercing

parlour whose neighbour in turn is a pub called The Good Mixer: well, Camden Town has always been full of people who are good at mixing (in any sense you like). So at 12.45 we went into Hâché and the waitress said that they wouldn't be open for another quarter of an hour. I wondered aloud why this should be so – and with remarkable candour, she told me: "There's been a bit of a disaster in the kitchen". Mmm ... it's not really what you want to hear, is it? The imagination first runs riot, and then to Fawltz Towers. Though like gullible fools with an irrepressible death wish, 15 minutes later we wandered back. The door was now locked, a notice in the window saying that they would be

open at 1.30 ... or alternatively, I thought, never ever again: who knew? Either way, they'd made a right bloody hache of my lunch plans. And it was raining now, so we shimmied around the corner into Jamestown Road – and lo, a strange and green seemingly undulating building looking as if it had been constructed by a post-modern visionary under the influence of Mescalín from a collection of elliptical aquaria. Half of it is Wagamama (no thanks) the other chunk housing The Camden Brasserie. I may or may not have been here before, but certainly I was aware of its good standing – so in we nipped. A smiling welcome from the chap on the door was a decent beginning – and I liked the room

FACTFILE

THE CAMDEN BRASSERIE

9-11 Jamestown Road, NW1
Tel: 020-7482 2114

Open from noon-11pm. Set

meal from noon-7pm, Mon-Fri

Food: ★★★★★★☆☆

Service: ★★★★★★☆☆

The Feeling: ★★★★★★☆☆

Cost: Set meal (see above)

£14.95 for two courses, £16.95

for three. Otherwise about

£80 for a three-course meal

for two, with drink.

immediately: high ceilinged and generous, with large and well-spaced tables set with taupe linen cloths and napkins. One great wall of trompe l'oeil bookshelves betrayed the casually upmarket and arty intentions of this very well run Camden institution (it's been in the area in various sites and guises since 1983). Yellow drum shades on the pendants – and a row of bright red ones over the jazzy-looking (in a good way) bar at the entrance. The chairs are a comfortable combination of curved rosewood backs and red leather seats, and there is also a scattering of Thonet bentwood. The background music was first rate in that it was virtually inaudible.

We shared a starter of four scallops – maybe a little over-seared but still juicy, on a good white bean puree with smoky bacony bits and endive that was decidedly too vinegary. The menu is full of things you actually want to eat – and although the steaks, and in particular the frites, are locally legendary, we each went for one of the two 'oven' options – a confit of Barbary duck leg with sauteed greens, new potatoes and tangerine salsa (which sounded zippy) and for me, braised lamb

shank with mash and seasonal vegetables. These turned out to be very good carrots, green beans and long stringy slices of courgette. The great hunk of shank, in all its greedy glory, came in a big white porcelain trencherman's trough, and the deep glazed gravy was a delight in itself: a very ably cooked dish, this – as was the confit. Here was much more than just the leg, with an intensely ducky flavour and just the right amount of gaminess and fat (to give it a bit of squish). With the sauteed greens, there was a sort of a pak choi thing going on, and this married well with the tang of salsa – which proved to be zippy indeed.

Obviously after a lamb shank, there is no room at all for pudding – so I swiftly ordered fresh strawberries (as good as you ever now can get – not a patch on the old days, etc etc) with vanilla cream, which might well have done with an extra slug of vanilla in it. My wife's black and white chocolate mousse (actually brown and cream, as they always are) vanished in the bat of an eyelid – I didn't even get a taste, though it's safe to say she enjoyed it, if all the lip-smacking was anything to go by. In short, a damn good lunch in a restaurant I had no intention of visiting: in life, such things are often the way. The service too was very proficient – a smiling young man and an equally pleasant young woman who, when the phone rang, actually ran to answer it ...! And with a bottle of Budvar beer and a large glass of Montepulciano, the bill came to a pleasing £68. Forty years ago, of course – for that sort of money you would have expected them to be chucking in the freehold.

☐ *Stuff (Faber and Faber, £7.99) is a novel, not about eating, by Joseph Connolly. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.*

Reds and whites – and green as well

WINE websites have all sorts of features, but it's not often that there are butterflies fluttering over them. But go to www.eightyacres.com. au and little blue ones flutter back and forth through the forest once the trees have grown. Wine may have long been red, white and pink, but it's also becoming green.

Those butterflies, and a pair of dragonflies, are a happy touch as Wakefield, in South Australia's Clare Valley, explains how its Eighty Acres wines became the first in the world to be 100 percent carbon neutral. The initiative, managing director Mitchell Taylor told me, isn't something as ephemeral as blue butterflies but a "cradle to grave concept".

The website gives a lot more

detail, but Taylor runs through how beyond reducing its own impact on atmospheric carbon, plus using the latest lighter glass bottles and encouraging recycling, the winery takes double offset action for the remaining CO2 it generates. First it buys into an Australian government-verified emission reduction unit scheme – specifically, a facility which composts household waste rather than letting it go to landfill – and then also plants a tree for every tonne of reduction units bought.

Eighty Acres, he adds, is the beginning. The green principles are likely to be rolled out over the rest of the Wakefield estate as time progresses.

For the moment, there are three carbon neutral wines available here: chardonnay/

viognier 2007, shiraz/viognier 2006 and cabernet/shiraz/merlot 2006, £9.85 each from www.slurp.co.uk. I've tasted the shiraz/viognier, though the 2007 vintage, and it's an attractive wine, dark, perfumed, with pure ripe black fruit carrying a touch of spice and an aromatic lift to the finish from the splash of viognier.

Cross the globe to Europe, and meet the Torres family, whose spectacular winery inland from Barcelona glows as a green beacon – latest recognition has been the accolade of international green company of the year in the 2010 Drinks Business Awards. It's a textbook example of how a very large-scale operation can have an effective environmental conscience while holding its own in the competitive retail world – you can find Torres wines,

Vina Sol and Sangre de Toro especially, in most high streets.

The list of actions ranges from electric delivery vans to donations of five million euros to research projects aimed at reducing atmospheric CO2 levels; from a commitment to cut the winery's own CO2 output by 30 percent by 2020 to the installation of 12,000 square metres of photovoltaic panels; from waste water recycling to generating energy from the six million kilo rubbish-pile of grape must and stalks it accumulates each year. Long-term, new vineyards are planned in higher locations as global warming advances, and there are trials with drought-resistant vine rootstocks.

There are no butterflies on the Torres website (www.torres.es),

though if you look very carefully indeed you might spot some of the bugs used in biological alternatives to chemical vine pest control. But there are some very pretty flowers on the label of the newest bottle to hit UK

shop shelves: Floralis Moscatel Oro (Majestic, £9.32 or £7 when you buy two), a flowery-scented sweet wine. To continue the natural theme, drink it with fruit desserts.

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