

HAVE you ever talked food, with foodies? Real foodies, I mean – not people such as us, who merely welcome a damn good lunch or dinner made up with care of fresh ingredients, well and simply cooked. No no – I’m talking about people who view the business of consumption both as a competitive sport and a trial of strength. They will tell you they are committed, you see (and many of them should be). They will vie to outdo one another on an ever-escalating scale of exaggeration and unlikelihood: you will be smothered by their memories, real or imagined, of having eaten the most outlandish things in perfectly unspeakable locations. “Of course I’ve had snake. A rattler, actually – fatal, if you don’t know what you’re doing. I seared it over my trusty old Ronson lighter. I was in a fetid swamp hard by the Ganges at the time. 120 in the shade – had there been any shade. One of the best meals I’ve ever eaten – or it would have been, were it not for the poison dart, festering in my thigh”. His opposite number will snort his disdain. “Snake, yes – very humdrum. Pangolin, of course – quite another matter. The scaly anteater, you know. Snout, obviously, is the delicacy here. It’s a question of turning it inside out, you know – the ants you fry later in a little sump oil – then braising it gently in blood. Alligator’s, for choice, though any old reptile will do at a pinch. Surprisingly good with the grappa they make only on the first Tuesday in November in the Mekong Valley. Well – I say grappa, but of course its driving force is actually the distillation of a virtually unknown fruit. Swore I’d never divulge its name. Close to a pineapple in some ways – but blue, you know. With thorns”.

On it goes. And even in very expensive restaurants they will compete for the beastly bits of creatures that I would throw to a dog, if I could actually bring myself to touch them at all. So there – I am rumbled: a squeamish critic. Well what of that? I is but a plain man, what knows what I likes. My guest for lunch the other day was Charlotte Metcalf – a very distinguished maker of documentary films on serious and often highly disturbing concerns for such as the BBC and Channel 4, and currently also the travel editor of *The Spectator*. She, of course, is the reverse of these loonies I have been describing, in that she very much appreciates good food and wine, is perfectly

It's game on at Comida

The place to take a film-maker who’s spent 10 years in Africa, this log timber cookhouse specialises in spit roasts where the challenge is to see how much you can eat. If only **Joseph Connolly** knew when to stop ...



Big game hunter ... Joseph at Comida in South Molton Street.

sane, and extremely energising company. She did however live in Africa for 10 years making films, and inevitably some fairly strange things would often come her way. “I remember in Nairobi,” she told me, “they would bring you fresh grilled meats on warriors’ spears. Zebra ... crocodile tail ... impala. That sort of thing. You were yearning for something green to go with them. Giraffe, I remember ...” “What’s giraffe taste like?” I asked her (blimey, I was thinking – best end of neck, it could take you a month). She pondered. “Gamey ...” she concluded. “It all was. Gamey”. Big Gamey, then.

Maybe foolishly, I decided to take her to a very tame and diluted London approximation of this singular approach to serving

food. Comida looks from the outside just like what I suppose it’s meant to be: a rough log timber gauché’s cookhouse, set very incongruously at the centre of South Molton Street amid very chic and upmarket shops, most notably Brown’s. The interior is not unlike a 1970s coffee shop with its orange uplit walls, neat black chairs with bright red seats, to match the banquettes. The only concessions to adornment are a huge flat wall-mounted television (black) and the skull of a cow (white). I didn’t get off to a promising start. I was early – 12.45 – and I said to a very sad-looking woman (more likely simply bored to death) that I had booked a table for one. “You want table for one?” “No – I’ve got a table at one. For two.” “You

want table at two ...?” “No. At one. Well now, actually. For two. If you see what I mean”. She just waved me away, wearied more than she could say by the whole affair. So I sat at a table for four.

Now one thing you must know about freelancers – we are never late for anything. So I was surprised when, after 15 minutes, there was no sign of Charlotte. A quick look round the corner, and there she was: she had told them my name, but had been seated quite elsewhere. Fifteen minutes ago. Either they had taken the whole ‘table for one’ schtick literally, or else they’re rather dim. Anyway, I’d had time to study the menu. There is a large and silver multi-pronged spit affair: Churrascaria (pronounced, the menu helpfully tells you,

FACTFILE

❑ **COMIDA**
46 South Molton Street, W1.
Tel: 020-7495 1177
❑ Open seven days a week, 11.30am-10.30pm (last orders). Licensed to 3am.
❑ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
❑ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
❑ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆ (though probably much better in the evening)
❑ Cost: Limitless grub for £18.50 lunch, £22.50 dinner. Puddings £4. Lighter options at around £12. Wine prices very reasonable.

shoo-has-ka-ree-ya). For an all-in price of £18.50 (£4 more for dinner) you get to wander over to a wall of bins and load up on as much salad, potatoes, mushrooms, peppers, rice and sauces as you feel you can decently get away with (far too much, then) and then the very friendly Brazilian fellow brings over in succession a series of spits which he carves at the table. The fun bit, I thought, would lie in the coloured discs they dole out – I had been reading all about it, and was beside myself with excitement: they are red on one side, green on the other, and you lay them on the table so that the guy with the grub can attend to your whims. They read as follows: on the A-side, Bring It On! Feed Me Now! And Hey, Don’t Ignore me! – and on the flip, OK You Win! Go Away I’m Stuffed! and I’m Going To Explode! It’s always reassuring to know that vastly overdoing it is the wholehearted intention.

So Charlotte and I shovelled on lots of the salad stuff from the spotlight selection, and awaited the meat. But wait – what’s this ...? No discs! Hey! Don’t Ignore Me! Bring Them On! Disc Me Now! But it was not to be: apparently they just couldn’t be bothered with them, this lunchtime (it’s a laid-back place, this – to the point of collapse). Charlotte is one of these enviably capable women who seems to pack everything into

her life, while at the same time raising on her own a six-year-old daughter. The previous evening she had been to Rachel Johnson’s book launch at *The Lady*, and was still fairly fragile – so just a glass of rose for her. I was glugging a decent Chilean merlot – and oh look! Here comes the beef! This is authentic Brazilian, and very good indeed – carved in long and smoky pinkish slices. “I like this a lot,” Charlotte approved. But not the pork that followed: her expression said it all. It was very fatty and unpleasant – I left all of mine. Then there was a honey glazed gammon – all right, but salty as gammon always seems to be – and after that very yummy chicken thighs and rather bouncy lamb. And then you go and get another bucket of potatoes and things, whereupon the bloke comes back round and you start all over again. I kept on accepting more of the beef – clearly the star of the show – while Charlotte very wisely drew to a close. Opposite us sat two young girls, one of them – blonde, beautiful and slender – was apparently a regular: she put away even more food than I did. Her plainer and podgy chum was new to the place and – get this – a vegetarian! Some sort of very cruel jape, do you think? Who can say? Anyway, she glumly stabbed at carrots while her slim and glamorous pal demolished a zoo.

I asked Charlotte if she had made films only in Africa. “Oh no – lots here too. I once worked on Paul McCartney’s film *Give My Regards To Broad Street*. I actually worked for him for three years. He fired me. He fires lots of people. But I ignored that. Just went on working”. That, I feel, is the spirit that made Britain great. She had to dash then, to pick up her daughter from school. But I didn’t. So I had more beef. I did. And then I waddled forth. I felt like an elephant. But it wasn’t on the menu.

❑ *The first of Joseph Connolly’s 10 novels is POOR SOULS (Faber and Faber, £7.99). All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.*

a fino sherry

liquid at the bottom which is sherry’s particular pride. First came Vina AB, the youngest amontillado. The flor is starting to disappear, leaving oxidation to take its course and turn the wine into an amber-coloured nectar, nuttily scented and flavoured.

Vina AB is very fine, but the experience got better and better, through the fabulously concentrated 30-year-old Del Duque to a deep, complex yet still amazingly fresh 60-year-old wine which the Gonzalez Byass family keeps for its own special occasions.

Though sales of sherry in Britain are slowly increasing, the challenge for Gonzalez Byass chairman Mauricio Gonzalez – fifth generation of the family which founded the business 175 years ago – is to bring in

new and younger consumers. The sherry and food message is one which works, especially as tapas-style eating proliferates, he acknowledges, and Tio Pepe now has the widest distribution it has ever known – annual sales of four million bottles world wide.

It’s not so much about advertising, says Gonzalez, but about consumer experience – and encouraging fino to be served like any other white wine, cool and in capacious glasses which will show off its aromas.

❑ Tio Pepe is widely available, at around £10. For Vina AB (£12) shop online at www.drinkshop.com; Del Duque (£17-£21, 37.5cl) is at Drinkshop.com, Fortnums, Harvey Nichols, Selfridges, Wholefoods and www.cambridgewine.co.uk.

