

THERE was a time, eons ago, when the area around Belsize Park tube station was not wholly made up of places to eat and drink.

There used to be things like a chemist, a travel agent and the sort of very posh chocolate shop where all the yummy violet creams and raspberry fondants were piled up artistically into pyramids on white paper doilies, these in turn gracing a series of crystal footed stands in glass-fronted cabinets. We schoolboys would stare into the window – very velvety and swagged – marvelling at the upholstered chocolate boxes with immense silk bows and taffeta roses ... marvelling too at the fact that Belsize Park could support so very many millionaires who actually had the nerve to cross the threshold, and also the loot to buy this stuff. We didn't. We sloped off to the Odeon to get a packet of Payne's Poppets or Sunpat Chocolate Raisins with which to annoy people during the big film. Because it was the Odeon, really, that then was the raison d'être of Belsize Park – and a very grand affair it was, looking not at all like its present plasticky incarnation as the Everyman and Budgens. Here was an imposing brick building with its art deco foyer, fluted columns and pinkish lighting – the very splendid staircases, soft in claret carpet and nosed in white leather that led up to the Dress Circle (for the millionaires who had just invested in a pound of violet creams in a brocade and organza box).

I saw many great films in that old Odeon, and have many fine memories. Not, though, of the day when my prep school, St Anthony's, saw fit to charter the place for its annual prizegiving. The space was far too massive for such an event – all the lucky and brainy bods who had won prizes had been notified and were herded together with their insufferably smug parents into the stalls, the rest of us peasants shoved up into the circle – but still there were acres of empty seats. Then, towards the end of this very tedious ceremony, it was announced that I had won something called 'The Headmaster's Prize' – and that was a shock, I can tell you – which entailed gasping, fighting my way through the heavy drapes at the back of the circle, getting hopelessly lost in the dim and spooky corridors, taking the wrong

WHY go anywhere other than France to choose wine? Heresy, surely, in this time of world-wide opportunity, but if I had to limit my cellar to a single country's product, it would most certainly be our nearest cross-Channel neighbour's.

There are lots of reasons, but variety has to be the most important. Consider the choice at this year's Absolutely Cracking French tasting, where some of the UK's leading wine writers – and I'm very flattered to be included – selected wines that they had particularly enjoyed, in three price categories.

In the 67-strong collection, there were several champagnes, a couple of bottles each from Burgundy, Bordeaux and Alsace and a few from the Rhone. But otherwise, wines came from much less familiar regions – from Savoie, Jura, the Charente, for example. Partly, I'm sure, that was due to a wish to share idiosyncratic, unusual discoveries. But it did demonstrate the depth and

The best picture show

Back in the day, the Odeon was Belsize Park's raison d'être. Now, it's just a Technicolor memory. But if you're looking for entertainment and an assorted cast of characters, then you'll find it all at Chez Nous, writes **Joseph Connolly**

staircase (twice) and eventually and after one hell of a while emerging blinking and distraught into the mouth of the stalls. When my name had been announced, everyone had applauded, of course – but they were quite sick of all that sort of thing by now, having assumed I had either not bothered to turn up, or else had dropped off the edge of the world. And so it was a very long and silent walk (although my mother, quite alone, still was clapping like a thing demented) to the apron of the stage to collect my prize. And then I stumbled on the steps on the way back down again, damn nearly breaking my bloody neck.

The most eye-opening film I saw there was *The Young Ones*. Yes yes – the mighty and mythical St Cliff of Richard, telling us how great it was to be young, with the attendant warning not to squander it ('Cos we may not be the young ones very long ...'). I came out of the Odeon just fizzing with it all – skittered back home while dancing around the lampposts: hell – I wanted to do the show right here!! Yes ... and just the other day, there I was back in Belsize Park, shaking my head at such sweet memory. My wife and I were sitting at the front of Chez Nous, idly glowering at the ranks of solitary smokers at the tables outside – their perfectly

legal smoke all wafting in skin-tightening clouds back into the restaurant itself, where any such action would get you arrested: such is the law. There are clearly a lot of regulars who come to this bargain price eatery, and it's easy to see why: there is no pressure to spend money, or hurry up and go. A young man, sucking on a Marlboro, asked for a glass of tap water, and nothing else: the waitress didn't bat an eyelid. One old fellow was stirring a cup of very cold coffee for upwards of 40 minutes. The people who were actually eating on this Thursday lunchtime shared a passion for everything eggy. I would imagine the 'all day breakfast' has a big take-up – and everyone else had omelettes. My wife said "They must go through an awful lot of eggs" – and just as she said it, a wonderful looking gentleman with purple turban and a full white beard – truly a Rajah of old – strode through the restaurant balancing a great crate of eggs on his shoulder. Probably wasn't a Rajah, then.

There is much else on the menu – prawn cocktail for a start. So I had that. And my wife had houmous. There is – despite the Chez Nous monicker – a tendency to Greek things here: meze ... and something called 'stuffed wine leaves', which I'd dearly



The reel deal ... Joseph Connolly at Chez Nous in Haverstock Hill.

FACTFILE

- ☐ **CHEZ NOUS**
157 Haverstock Hill, NW3
Tel: 020-7483 3373
- ☐ Open all day from early breakfast onwards.
- ☐ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- ☐ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- ☐ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- ☐ Cost: Extremely reasonable, particularly for all-day breakfast. Otherwise, about £30 for a two-course meal for two, with a drink.

like to see. The cocktail came on a plate – a decent pile of Atlantic prawns covered in a too sharp Marie Rose, with a single lettuce leaf on the top: an upside down cocktail, then – served with a giant doorstep of white buttered bread, as last seen accompanying a fry-up and mug of Tetley's in a 1950s transport café off the A40. The houmous was ... well look, I can only quote the person eating it: "It might be home made ... it's rather dry. Less smooth than the one I buy in Waitrose. A bit like Polyfilla, actually. I like it". She had a similar comment about her main: lamb meatballs with rice and vegetables. They weren't

at all balls – flattened patties, and rather heavy on the sage. She said they reminded her of a childhood treat: Smedley's frozen beefburgers. And she meant it kindly. The star of the show was actually the veg: baby carrots, mushrooms, broccoli, green beans, grilled tomato and green pepper – all fresh, al dente and excellent. I had chicken breast in a cream and mushroom sauce – and never mind the Polyfilla, this looked just like Dulux Brilliant White Emulsion with bits in ... but actually tasted very good: it enveloped the tender chicken in a rather gorgeous cloak, and kept it warm. The portions here are very generous, and served on big rectangular plates with rounded corners, like old television screens. Chips were goodish – and could have been special if crisped for longer.

It's pretty ramshackle, décor-wise. Acid yellow rough brick walls, globular light pendants and fretwork shelves for gew-gaws, of which there were none. Other walls are covered in what used to be called 'Beauty Board' – which was always a laugh as it's really chipboard dipped in Bisto. But people don't come here for the décor: they come for a smiling welcome, an unhurried stay, a place outside to smoke, very good value ... and eggs. On the pavement, there's a trough of

newspapers. One young chap – who did look a bit odd – when he'd finished his cigarette and coffee, got down on his hands and knees and picked up all the screwed up paper napkins, fag ends and sugar wrappers, and placed them carefully into his pockets. Then he swiped *The Guardian*, and did a runner. The young, charming and happy waitress – Czech, at a guess – said to us "I do hope that you enjoyed your meal". I said it was fine – and does the bill include service ...? She shook her head. "We have no service charge. Sometimes – occasionally, someone will leave a tip". Reader – I left a tip. She really was one of the happiest people I've seen in ages ... and no, I didn't tell her that she may not be a young one very long: she would have thought me a liar. Because she knew, like they all do, that she would be a young one for just ever and ever. She was smiling so much she might even have broken into song: hell, she could've done the show right there!!

☐ *Joseph Connolly's WINTER BREAKS (Faber and Faber, £7.99) is a sequel to SUMMER THINGS. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.*

Star wines to light up your Christmas

breadth of wine in France quite wonderfully.

New this year was a chance to nominate Christmas wines and I can't imagine an easier way to dress the December 25 dinner table, solve a lot of gift decisions and pour for parties than to consult the list of choices. I'm writing about them now, as some need to be ordered.

To start the festivities rolling in the most stylish way imaginable, serve Lamandier-Bernier's grand cru champagne extra brut, Vieilles Vignes de Cramant 2004, the suggestion of Helen Savage from the Newcastle Journal, who has a refined, imaginative palate – her other choices were just as special. "Incredibly beautiful" was her description, the perfect summing up (now 2005 vintage, £60, Berry Bros & Rudd). Helen recommended it for Christmas Eve with fresh, simply-cooked



turbot – a confirmation of how good ever-so-slightly mature champagne can be with food.

While we're still on very posh wines, Charles Metcalfe chose a big red from Roussillon to drink with turkey, goose, beef or game: L'Extreme, Les Clos Perdus 2005, vin de pays des Cotes Catalanes. It's big, certainly, and fragrantly compelling with a hint of Christmas cake rich fruitiness. Great this year, he argued, and "still terrific for Christmas 2025". Bought now (www.artisanandvineonline.com), its £46 price tag might seem a bargain then.

Several more frugally-minded writers suggested beaujolais – my favourite was Joanna Simon's bottle for Boxing Day collation lunch, Alain Chatoux Vieilles Vignes 2009 (£9.95, BBR), elegant, fresh, juicy, almost strawberries-and-cream style.

Returning to straight-from-the-oven turkey, Domaine des Saumades 2007 chateaufeu-dupape, (BBR again, £20.40) could well challenge L'Extreme's podium place: "perfumed, opulent, spicy black fruits and deliciously juicy texture," purred Anthony Rose. It, too, will be good for many Christmases to come. As will a third recommendation, fragrant and savoury Puig Oriol Domaine La Tour Vieille 2007 Collioure (£15, www.yapp.co.uk) – perhaps best now with steak rather than fowl, suggests its advocate, Tom Cannavan.

My offering was a white, Le Roc des Angles Vieilles Vignes 2008 (£20.50, www.lescaves.co.uk), one of Roussillon's increasing array of refined, subtle, mineral-rich wines. My present to myself, I said, to drink with the finest roast chicken once the fuss of the festivities

was over. But with turkey it would be lovely.

As would the superb Savennieres, Chamboureaux Domaine FL 2007 (£25, www.libertywine.co.uk), which Sarah Ahmed recommended. It's oakier than usual with this sometimes austere Loire appellation, but consultant Stephane Derenoncourt, star of Bordeaux, has ensured the wood is integrated and delicate, allowing chenin's pure, citrus minerality to shine through.

And to finish – on its own, or with a posh chocolate bar rather than the complication of pudding – what better than the red Domaine Poudroux Maury Vendange Mise Tardive 2005 (£11 50cl, Waitrose), a star example of Sarah Jane Evans's expertise in matching wine and chocolate. Happy Christmas!