

Deep-fried, crisp and even

GOD rest ye, merry gentlemen! And ladies, of course. And nor am I forgetting the pink-cheeked little kiddywinks, Lord love them – for 'tis the season to put your feet up. Not by way of slipping on black ice and coming a rather nasty cropper, no of course not – but in the sense of taking it easy, at the end of another long year. At which point in my narrative said ladies (see above) will be scoffing. Not as in mince pies, but as in buckets of scorn. They will not be going Ho Ho Ho! – it's Ha Ha Ha! they'll be going. Only a man, they will be fuming – only a useless selfish bloated bastard of a man could think that Christmas afforded you any sort of a rest. And then these ladies – admittedly the more blinkered and aggressive sort – will reel off very tediously the thousand-and-one appalling tasks and duties and challenges they all are bound to cope with and overcome between now and the day itself, while the men just slump in the pub. Or in front of the flat-screen. Those same men who, on Christmas Eve, will incur a parking ticket through having abandoned the car on a double yellow while they nip into Boots for the same old bottle of Chanel No Bloody 5 – or (worse) English Lavender. News: not all men are like this. Some men buy and decorate the tree, spend a fair deal of time and thought choosing and wrapping quality presents, see to all the drink and Christmas cards side of things and maybe even set the festive table. A good many these days attend to the cooking as well – not to say pay for it all: so maybe the lady doth protest too much.

Right: having now alienated a goodly half of my readership, I shall continue to blunder on regardless in the wintry company of the few of you who remain. I myself absolutely adore the whole Christmas thing, though – and I am all for tradition. Do you have Christmas traditions? You must do. Everybody does. I know one family who annually haul out their hoard of pre-war silver sixpences to stick into the pudding: there tend to be fewer every Christmas, though no one will admit to stealing or swallowing any. Another chap I know insists on

Out for Christmas lunch with Ham&High editor Geoff Martin, **Joseph Connolly** is inexplicably pulled towards a fish and chip shop. But unable to forgo the great overstuffing tradition, he just has to sample the Mars bar



The place to be ... Joseph Connolly at Oliver's in Haverstock Hill (left) and (above) eagerly awaiting the onset of the festive season.

stuffing the turkey, this due less to a husbandly rallying round and more to the fact that on their very first Christmas together his wife neglected to stuff the bird at all, on the grounds that it wasn't empty. The memory of that meal continues to cast a long shadow. Often a tree will be topped by a haggard old angel cobbled together in the 1970s from the inner tube of a roll of Andrex, yellow wool, some netting, much Sellotape and Copydexed sequins: it's a hideous piece of debris, sure – but it's a tradition, you see? I still do stockings – and because he never seems quite able to negotiate our chimney, I also see to the wolfing down of Santa's cake and Drambuie.

Another tradition I strive to adhere to and always fail in quite catastrophically is the sharing of a December lunch with everyone I've ever met in the course of the whole of my life. It's just such a devil trying to cram it all in and still remain in a vaguely human state, come the Great

Day. Some people, on Boxing Day, go for a good brisk walk. On Boxing Day, it's all I can do to be briskly vertical. But there – food and drink is a serious business, and I mustn't be seen to be shirking my duty. Now one very important fellow I just had to have lunch with is Geoff Martin, the editor of this fine local organ. So where should I take him, I wondered ...? At this time of year, you really want somewhere such as Rules in Covent Garden (London's oldest restaurant, actually) but I thought it ought to be local. The Holly Bush – now that once more they are serving very good food – would be ideal, what with the log fires and all ... but I've already reviewed it. So as you can tell, I had pretty much decided on somewhere dark panelled, warm, cosy and traditional – so how we came to find ourselves in a newish fish and chip shop covered in green and white sparkling tiles is still quite beyond me to understand. Look: it was a freezing cold

day, and I just wasn't thinking responsibly – and Geoff is far too much the gentleman to say to me "Fish and chips?! I should cocoa, sunbeam!" – so there we were at Oliver's, in Haverstock Hill. The décor is actually rather cheery in a bright and springlike way, but festive it ain't. The floor is black-and-white chequerboard, the chairs aluminium – it's somewhere between an old-fashioned Northern chippy and an old-fashioned American diner, while still managing to appear rather modern.

Geoff and I were very ready for a plate of hot food. He'd had no sleep the night before because he had to see off his daughter at one airport (where everything was grounded, due to the snow) and then zoom off to another airport to meet his brother (where everything was grounded, due to the snow). My son and I had just dragged back home a great big Christmas tree from Crescent Fruitiers in Belsize Village, where we always go – so add

FACTFILE

- ❑ **OLIVER'S**
95 Haverstock Hill, NW3
Tel: 020-7586 9945
- ❑ Open Tuesday to Saturday
12.15pm-2.30pm, 5pm-10.15pm
- ❑ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- ❑ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
(polite, but took forever)
- ❑ The Feeling:
★★★★★☆☆☆☆ (better in summer)
- ❑ Cost: All pretty reasonable – nothing much above a tenner, and cheaper for the takeaway menu

that to the sub-zero temperature and my slithering canter down to Oliver's and God – I was barely breathing. Geoff very sensibly went for the battered haddock with chips (always the best choice) and I very poncily went for whole grilled plaice. All the fish here is either in batter or matso meal, or else grilled – but battered is the way to go. Not that we found that out for simply ages. The place was pretty empty, but after 20 minutes there still was no sign of grub. The fellow serving was politeness itself – so very sweetly caring that you wanted to wrap him with care and put him under the tree: but still. They've got bottles of vin de pays d'Oc for only £9.99, so we concentrated on one of those. I fiddled with the bottle of Sarson's on the table, while Geoff fooled about with the plastic ketchup squirter: a perfect and warming Dickensian tableau.

It was Geoff who pinpointed the source of the delay: behind the open fish bar where they do all the doings, three people were filling up no fewer than seven carrier bagsworth of takeaway. A nice order, to be sure – but maybe it shouldn't have been at the expense of those starving souls waiting obediently at an empty table. The food didn't arrive until 40 minutes after it was ordered: something of a record in a fish and chip shop, I'd say. So there was plenty of time to overhear the American lady lunching with locals at an

adjacent table (or waiting for food, if it's accuracy we're after). She said she loved Hampstead because it was full of Ardists and Riders, and her favourite rider was Joan Lee Car (she, presumably, who rode The Spy Who Came In From The Cold). And then the fish came! Hosanna in the highest! Geoff said of his haddock "I couldn't fault it". So I faulted my pleasure: overdone, every other mouthful charged with salt. Chips a bit soggy, but with Sarson's maybe they're meant to be. Two pots of mushy peas – the traditional version better than the groovy smooth and minty one. And that was that, really. But not quite! I then ordered a deep fried Mars Bar. I did. Because we've heard, haven't we, how they live on them in Glasgow and places – so let's see what we've been missing! Now you might imagine it to be leaden and greasy and thoroughly repulsive. Not at all: I am here to tell you that it is far, far worse than that: an offshore oil slick, married to Hampstead clay: unspeakable. The accompanying ice cream, however, was excellent.

Geoff has plans for next year: a major charity walk. He could have done the Great Wall of China – but, he said, "a wall is just a wall – it looks like the shed end of Stamford Bridge" (whatever in God's name that might mean). He could have gone cycling in the Himalayas with Edwina Currie: enough said. But he's settled for the Inca Trail, fit and brave fellow that he is. And me? I can't think further than this weekend, when I shall eat, drink and be merry – and after, just a soupcon of peace on earth, this to be swiftly followed by a long and silent night. Happy Christmas, folks!

❑ *Joseph Connolly's latest novel is JACK THE LAD AND BLOODY MARY (Faber and Faber, £7.99). All previous restaurants may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk. ❑ To sponsor Geoff Martin on his Inca Trail Trek for Hampstead Hospice go to <http://original.justgiving.com/geoffmartin1> or write to geoff.martin@hamhigh.co.uk.*

Wise shoppers will follow independent stars

THIS is a column in two parts, as it's the last before the end of 2010 and I wanted both to advise on a strategy if you still haven't bought the bottles for Christmas dinner and to suggest some happy wines for partying between now and the middle of January.

Part one, though, is posing a problem – I hope you won't be as frustrated as I've been, trying to track down sellers of specific bottles. But let's forget such recommendations in favour of some sound sense: this is the moment when independent wine merchants come even more into their own.

Even on Christmas Eve, there's unlikely to be anything like the queue you'll find in a supermarket, and opening hours can be very accommodating. The staff know their wines, too, so if you explain what you'll be eating or describe your likes and dislikes, they can suggest bottles

in various price brackets. Just because independents don't have the huge buying power of Tesco or Asda, that doesn't mean sky-high prices – very decent burgundy or bordeaux, for example, can be found at around £10 and there can be star value-for-money in wines which are produced in quantities far too small to interest the big buyers.

Where to go? I hope you've already got your favourites – but all these are recommended. Jeroboams (Heath Street, Hampstead, and St John's Wood Road, open until 6pm both Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve) has great own-brand champagne, down to £15 a bottle by the case, as well as stylish classics from France, Spain and Italy. Bottle & Basket (Highgate High Street, open until 7pm both festive evenings) has unfortunately run out of my favourite Torres Christmas bottles, Fransola sauvignon blanc and Salmos Priorat (both around £18) but has

lots of tempting alternatives.

The Winery (Clifton Road, Maida Vale, open to 9pm both evenings) is the best place in the UK for fine

German dry riesling – a superb choice under £20, and



wonders beyond – as well as imaginative choices from Burgundy, California and Italy. Zelas (Archway Road, Highgate, 9pm both evenings) specialises in natural and organic wines (the former are low-sulphur, which just might reduce the

post-festive headaches), world-wide – and these are no longer wines which are merely worthy, rather they're worth drinking.

Nicolas branches (there are nine in Ham&Highland, closing times vary but unlikely to be before 7pm) are a fine source of French classics and regional wines rarely seen elsewhere, usually sold to you by French-origin staff.

The other widespread specialists, Oddbins (closing times vary from 6pm to 8pm, so check with your local branch) and Majestic (5pm both evenings) will fill any remaining gaps.

On to party ideas. I admit my practice is to take a bottle I like and fill my glass from that, unless there are other interesting contributions. Sadly, too many partygoers don't look further than

the big brands or the cheapest current offers. Setting a £6 limit, all these will raise spirits happily.

First, a tempting offer – The Ned sauvignon blanc 2010 is currently £6 at both Majestic and Waitrose. Its New Zealand origin is clear, but it's delightfully drinkable. This has long been an attractive wine, but this vintage is particularly good.

Another white and a red from Waitrose: Araldica La Luciana 2009 Gavi, £6, and La Rectorie 2009 Ventoux, £5. From Sainsbury: Fairtrade chenin-viognier 2010, £5, Taste the Difference Cotes du Rhone Villages 2009, £6; M&S: Las Falleras white and red, £4.30, Popolino rosso 2009, £5, Vina Ulmo cabernet sauvignon 2009, £5.

Enjoy the party!