

WELCOME back, folks! Can you still remember whether or not you enjoyed your festive turkey? I did, thanks for asking. For the first time we got it from Allens of Mayfair: the best I have ever eaten – and so was their fillet of beef. Superb. But that's all over. So – straight down to business: do you fancy a touch of lunch? No seriously – I'm asking you. Inviting you. I really am. Well look: we're two weeks into a so-called new year, but bloody hell – it's all so very strikingly and depressingly similar to the fag end of the last one, don't you think? Grey. Raw. Chilly and colourless, quite frankly, and it's getting me down. So I thought we could do with a lift – and that's why I was wondering whether, if you've nothing more pressing on your hands, you felt you might care for a bite. All you have to do is whizz off to my website – details below – and click on the 'Contact' page. Then you send an email, briefly stating why you'd like to have lunch with me (though I can quite understand if by and large and on the whole you'd really rather not) and where, reasonably locally, you think we could go. My treat. Just the two of us. Cosy, eh? And whichever one of you strikes lucky will be written up on this very page: an offer you can't refuse, no?

And if only to remind you all of where we really can't go, because I've already done them, I'm going to spend the rest of this column looking back on the highs, middles and lows of 2010 (the full reviews of which appear chronologically on the website). Out of the 50 I cantered through last year, a few really do stand out (for good or ill, as soon you will see). The trick, of course, in this game is to try to transform each experience into a readable and passably amusing piece of prose that will appeal to not just the inveterate diner, but all those who have not the least intention of eating at my restaurant of the week, or, indeed, anywhere else. Now I'm no great expert on food, but – having frittered the better part of my life in thousands of them – I think I might by now know a little bit about restaurants. What they're trying to do, how they're presenting themselves – what are their strengths, and where the flaws: décor, pricing, detail, how much wool being pulled over how many eyes. There are certain places where you will have a really good time, but the food is so-so. Other places, the cooking is sublime, but the event itself can prove to be a chill and miserable experience. And – just so you know: I never warn a restaurant of an impending review, and I don't take freebies offered by PRs. I really am that pure.

As you might remember, I award each place a number of stars out of 10 for food, service and (more recently) 'the feeling'. It's important, 'the feeling', and it's hard to pin down ... but you know those restaurants you keep on going back to? They, for you, have got 'the feeling'. It could be simple convenience, the welcome, your usual table, the type of clientele, the value. Lord, it might even be the food. But whatever it is, these places are treasures. So anyhow ... looking back, I see that last year I did not award higher than eight stars for food to a single one of them. But eight is pretty damn good, and I gave it to a clutch of very different restaurants indeed: **BOCCA DI LUPO**, **LES DEUX SALONS**, **SIMPSON'S**, **GALVIN BISTROT DE LUXE**

Lunch? It's on me

Looking back on 2010, there have been corkers and real stinkers of restaurants for **Joseph Connolly**. So, as he's reminded of them, he's offering you the chance to dine out – at a restaurant of your choice



How did the chefs fare? ... Joseph, left, and, above, at Café Med in St John's Wood.

in Baker Street (very probably the best French bistro in town) along with three more in nearby Marylebone: **LE RELAIS DE VENISE** (they do only steak and sauce, you cannot book, and yet the whole thing is a palpable delight), **PROVIDORES** (superb fusion cooking, though squarely aimed at plutocrats) and **L'AUTRE PIED** – this, the sister restaurant of the mighty **PIED A TERRE** in Charlotte Street, being a good example of a very able kitchen married to a soulless room and very indifferent service: result? More than decent food, but I didn't have a good time.

Other eight-star restaurants (the stars being for excellence in their field) were even closer to home: Camden Town scored three, with **MARKET** in Parkway (shack-like premises with freshly cooked and first class English produce at bargain prices), **CAMDEN BRASSERIE** – one of the originals, and still among the best – and then probably my favourite of them, **CAPONATA**. This is the admirable Sicilian replacement for the very run-of-the-mill **DELANCEY STREET**

CAFÉ, and they really do know what they are doing: décor, welcome, service, pricing and food – it's all pretty much bang on. And a nudge away in Chalk Farm there's **MARINE ICES** – so long established, and not to be overlooked. First class pasta dishes and (of course) ice cream in an unpretentious and timeless setting, and quite fantastic value.

I never thought I'd be able to award eight stars to anywhere in Highgate – and then lo, along came **COTE**. This very stylish and professional branch of Richard Caring's ever-growing chain has obliterated the memory of the short-lived **FLUTES**, and even (whisper it) **SAN CARLO**. My final eight-star review went to the Comeback Kid of the Year: **THE HOLLY BUSH**, in Hampstead Village. When I reviewed it in 2009, I gave it a grudging and actually inexplicably generous four stars for food and none at all for service, in that they declined to provide any. One year later – new ownership, new chef, new staff – and they score eight for both food and service. It now is one of the locals I go back to – along with **THE WELLS** (an excellent

kitchen) and **THE FLASK** (calming place, with the best sort of pub food at bargain prices).

One notch down, among those restaurants chalking up seven stars were a few quite humble spots which therefore did very well indeed to hit this high: Highgate's **ROSE & CROWN**, Fleet Road's **RAVEL'S BISTRO**, **THE BREW HOUSE** at Kenwood, Heath Street's **JIN KICHI**, **THE BUTTERY** at Burgh House and the **GARDEN GATE** pub in South End Green: I'm happy to recommend all of these as pretty reliable places, and often rather more than that. Also **ARTIGIANO**, in Belsize Village, and St John's Wood's **CAFÉ MED**. **TROJKA** too, in Regent's Park Road – although I gave it only six stars, as I did to **CHEZ NOUS** and **CHEZ BOB**, both on Haverstock Hill, as well as a clutch of rather disappointing places which I had expected rather more of: **CAFFE CALDESI**, **LA CAGE IMAGINAIRE**, **ODIN'S GREEN COTTAGE** and **OLIVER'S**: not too great. Standing apart is **GILGAMESH**, in Stables Market: extraordinary in its extravagance, and rather

good grub. Unlike its sister, **SHAKA ZULU** ... mention of which brings us neatly, dear readers, to the clunkers. The mind-altering subterranean vision that is **SHAKA ZULU** is almost comically expensive, and rates only four stars. Lower still were the newly revamped (or ruined, according to many locals) **OLD WHITE BEAR** with three stars for an overpriced, frankly slapdash and partially inedible meal. **LE CELLIER DU MIDI** in Church Row – 50 years old, but not going strong: three stars only for fossilised 1970s hotel food. On a very generous two stars there is the late and thoroughly unlamented **BENIHANA**, the Japanese joke in Swiss Cottage, which – the week following the appearance of my review – committed hara-kiri. And now, ladies and gentlemen (optional drumroll) ... with just one star to its name, please don't welcome the **CZECHOSLOVAK RESTAURANT** in West End Lane ... ! Perfectly unspeakable.

So that was 2010 – and I was lucky enough to share all this troughing with a slew of rather interesting people. My wife and

assorted chums, of course, as well as authors, journalists, a scriptwriter, a poet, a cartoonist, a newspaper editor, publishers, actors, a painter, a musician, a travel editor, a plutocrat, literary agents and food critics. Coming soon (for next week, normal service will be resumed) are restaurants in Islington, Primrose Hill, Marylebone and Hampstead Village in the company of – among others – two very well known locals: a food expert and a wine expert, both of whom shall remain nameless. Well okay, then: Frances Bissell and Malcolm Gluck. And so what about you ... ? Would you care to add to their number? Well then don't be a stranger – write to me now. The offer of lunch is open to anyone local. Though not, obviously, if you happen to be male, or old or something. Kidding. I'm kidding.

☐ www.josephconnolly.co.uk
'Contact the Author' page, if you want to write a foody email, or 'Restaurant Reviews' page to read in full any of the reviews referred to above. Or any others, come to that. Be seeing you! Maybe.