

I REALLY felt quite sorry for the place. I mean to say, it's one thing to inflict upon an establishment a restaurant critic, but when I booked a table for four at L'Absinthe in Primrose Hill – billed as 'Your Local French Restaurant' – I was breathlessly clutching to my bosom the fat and secret knowledge that one of my guests was to be the highly regarded cook and gastronomic writer, Frances Bissell. You all know Frances from, among many other things, the food articles she writes every month for the page opposite this one. And accompanying her would be her husband Tom, whose knowledge of wine is pretty much total, and especially in terms of the upper end French stuff. L'Absinthe, then, was faced with the task of delighting a pair of heavyweights. So as I say, I really felt quite sorry for the place.

I've known the Bissells since the old and heady days when Frances was *The Times* Cook. I still remember with a whimpered moan of pleasure *The Times* Christmas Pudding (and the cake) derived from her recipes – and also a fine evening's dining at the old Café Royal in Regent Street (in the company of Tom, and Julian Barnes) when Frances was the guest chef. She still is regularly invited to cook and talk in the world's more illustrious gaffs, Tom always on hand to add to the lustre his mastery of wine (rather amusingly pre-empting any predictable reactions to such connoisseurship by having inscribed upon his visiting card 'Wine Bore'). So when my wife and I tootled up to the rather pleasing deep green frontage of L'Absinthe, eager for dinner on a cold and drizzly evening, I was thinking Oh blimey, this is going to be an interesting one, and no mistake. What shall we eat? And what will Frances say? What will we drink? And the Lord alone knows what Tom will say.

The warm and inviting exterior of this corner restaurant is rather undermined by the pale and very spartan dining room within. And downstairs, where we were to be, is rather more of the same. Pale grey walls with little adornment save the names of French wines and domains rather jerkily hand-painted by way of a dado rail. Tables and chairs are deliberately rustic and basic – and therefore rocky and damned uncomfortable – though I was drawn to a table towards the rear with a semi-circular banquette cheerily upholstered in very welcome red. Oh good – we'll sit there, then.

French who just don't know their onions ...

You would pity any restaurant subjected to the scrutiny of a gastronomic writer and her wine buff husband. But L'Absinthe in Primrose Hill was sadly lacking when it came to authentic cooking, writes **Joseph Connolly**



Allo, allo ... Joseph Connolly at L'Absinthe in Primrose Hill.

Well we won't, in fact – because, I was very Frenchly informed, "eez for cease purple. You earnly fur purple." Mmm, I thought – optimistic, very: they'll never fill the place, not on a night like this. I was wrong, of course – by nine o'clock it was rammed and heaving.

So my wife and I set to scanning the menus, while Frances cast a critical eye; Tom had ignored the menu completely, and was deep into the wine list. This is something of a draw here, actually (partially why I had picked it) because upstairs they sell the stuff retail, and in the restaurant some rather special things are available at shop prices plus £10 corkage. And already Tom was humming with discovery: "This will be great!" he trumpeted, rather alarmingly. "A burgundy, Chambolle Musigny '99 – £39. That's so cheap – but I bet they

don't have any ...". He was bang on the money there: all gone, apparently. But his continued perseverance threw up a 2006 Chassagne-Montrachet (white burgundy) to get us through the starters, and then a Vosne Romanee (red burgundy) for the meaty mains. At £41 and £43 (including corkage), Tom insisted that in a West End restaurant they would be three times that – and they were indeed rather fine, and in particular the white, which surprised me, as I don't normally drink it.

In addition to the classic bistro menu, there is a sprinkling of specials on a blackboard – these to include 'Chalk Farm smoked salmon', which may or may not be funny, but nonetheless somehow remains very deeply unappealing. Frances was tentative, you could see that, though eventually she plumped for the most classic of classics:

six escargots, and steak frites (Tom following suit, but exactly). My wife was starting with a Lyonnaise salad – mixed leaves, croutons, lardons and poached egg – and I had mushrooms with shallot confit on pain perdu. "I've never seen that ..." said Frances quietly – smiling quite charmingly, though visibly suppressing a shudder (because pain perdu is normally served with sweet things). Anyway, all it was was soggy stale bread: just hot fresh toast would have been so much better. The chopped mushrooms were very yummy and intense – but so very few! I would happily have swapped the shallot thing and a pile of very vinegary lollo rosso for more of them. "Lollo rosso," said Frances, "should be banned. It's always gritty, and tastes of nothing". Or vinegar, in this case. Shame, really – because my wife had a mountain of it: very acetic again,

FACTFILE

- ❑ **L'ABSINTHE**
40 Chalcot Road, NW1
Tel: 020-7483 4848
- ❑ Open Tuesday to Friday
noon-2.30pm, 6pm-10.30pm.
Saturday noon-4pm, 6pm-10.30pm. Sunday noon-4pm,
6pm-9.30pm.
- ❑ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- ❑ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- ❑ The Feeling:
★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- ❑ Cost: About £90 for a three-course meal for two, with wine. There are, however, cheap wine bargains (and expensive wine bargains).

and among the jungle she sought out with diligence the lardons, the so-so croutons, and wee bits of egg. The snails in garlic were okay – but not in the shell with the attendant grips and forklet, so presumably canned. "There's no salt," said Frances, "and no great burst of garlic". She had asked for her and Tom's ribeyes to be 'saignant', and so they were. "It's a good bit of meat, cooked properly ..." she said, "but it just doesn't taste of very much". The so-called Bearnaise sauce was no such thing: sour, thin, and choked with dried tarragon. The chips were good, though – and yet another heap of tart lettuce was thoroughly ignored.

Duck confit is too often horribly dry and salty, or otherwise properly yielding, but fatty: my wife's was the latter. Shall I mention the mouth-twisting acreage of lollo rosso? Best not. And nor shall I mention the further lump of it that accompanied my boeuf bourguignon. This was tender enough – but no more than tepid, which is ridiculous, frankly: rather like a cooling steak pie without the lid, and lacking all comforting heat, gloss and big

deep flavour that one rightfully expects from this venerable dish. We shared two puddings – 'crème brulee a L'Absinthe' and Tarte Tatin. I checked whether the crème brulee (or Cambridge Burnt Cream, as Frances perfectly correctly prefers to call it) was simply named after the restaurant, or whether it actually incorporated the infamous wormwood. "Oui", said the waitress. Further probing revealed that it did contain the hard stuff. Except that it didn't: not a single trace. Nonetheless, Frances awarded it eight out of ten, which is fairly impressive. But the establishment should hang its head in shame for the thing they presented as a Tarte Tatin: here were large cold lumps of cooked apple on a claggy base: no fine slicing, no caramelisation, and no oven warmth. And that's the big trouble here: they put themselves forward as so very faithfully French – as was underlined by the proprietor who did a lap of honour: he was not wearing a striped jersey, and nor did he carry an accordion and a string of onions – though the black beret was in place, and he hammed it up for all he was worth. But the basic boast is an empty one: none of these supposedly classic French dishes was truly the real deal. The locals, though – having seen so many failed restaurants on this attractive site – clearly have embraced the place. And I can sort of see why: it's welcoming, casual, convenient, and the wine prices are rare. But on the strength of this dinner, authentic it ain't.

So we left: heads were being shaken, as lips were reflectively pursed. Once more I really felt quite sorry for the place. And us, actually.

❑ *Joseph Connolly's novel LOVE IS STRANGE is published by Faber and Faber (£7.99). All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.*

out of weather-beaten Roussillon region

picks well before any sign of jammy overripeness, cherishes the crop in a cellar which is an integral part of her home, and the resulting wines are wonderfully elegant.

In two trips to the region within two years, I've visited other artisan vigneron, some newcomers, some new generations. Olivier Pithon from the Loire, who names one cuvee after his Jersey cow, Lais, makes whites of impressive, minerally complexity. Jean Gardies has a specially fine mourvedre-dominated red in a tempting line-up drawn from vineyards in Tautavel, home of one of Europe's earliest hominids. English emigre Katie Jones is promising much from vines spectacularly sited below a Cathar castle, while

Preceptorie de Centernach and Domaine Fontanel make delicious sweet wines in the local vin doux natural tradition alongside excellent dry reds, whites and – from the former – pinks.

There are admired wines even from outwardly old-fashioned but internally modern co-ops. The one at Calce works in partnership with M&S, while the vigneron of Chateau de Pena continue a long-standing relationship with the Wine Society.

Most prices are still modest, given the quality of the wines. But beware: some bottles now top 100 euros. For bargains, don't delay too long.

Wines to buy: Bila-Haut: Vignes de Bila-Haut Rouge 2008-2009, £8-£9, www.winedirect.co.uk, www.slurp.

co.uk; L'Esquerda 2008, £90.40 six-bottle case, www.everywine.co.uk; Occultum Lapidem 2007, £15, www.robersonwinemerchant.co.uk. Domaine Roc des Anges: Segna de Cor 2009, £15, www.slurp.co.uk; Vieilles Vignes Blanc 2008, £20, Zelas, 216 Archway Road, Highgate, www.zelas.co.uk; wider choice available from importer Les Caves de Pyrene, www.lescaves.co.uk. Les Caves also imports the wines of Olivier Pithon.

Gardies' Tautavel 2007, £15; Preceptorie de Centernach Coume Marie white, red and rose 2007-2009, all £11; and from the Chateau de Pena co-operative, Chateau de Pena red 2008, £6.50, and The Society's French Full Red, £5, all from The Wine



Society, www.thewinesociety.com, which has a further fine selection in its current Rhone offer, open until February 15. Domaine Fontanel: red 2009,

£8, white 2008, £11.50, sweet muscat £13.50, www.stonevine.co.uk. Katie Jones' red, white and sweet muscat (50cl) 2009, £15, www.domainejones.com. Calce



Biodynamic ... Gilles Trouiller in the Bila-Haut vineyards and one of its bottles.

co-operative: Les Orris white and red 2008, £9 (£7 until January 30), M&S.