

I DON'T much care for online, when it comes to booking restaurants. Oh God let's face it: I don't much care for online when it comes to absolutely anything on the planet – but there, that's just my invariable techno-hopelessness, hardened by the crust of distrust. Not of the system so much as myself: I cradle a craven dread that although I feel sure I have successfully clicked here, and then a little bit there, in order to book lunch for two at one o'clock, perfectly plain and simple, somehow by way of a rogue and gammy digit or an all too regular breakdown in concentration, what I have in fact commissioned is a wedding reception, say – something quite intimate for around 20 people: champagne and photos, and then the withdrawal to a snug and civilised private room upstairs, this involving cake. So I was as rattled as blazes when I swung into the Almeida restaurant the other day and was confronted by a large and handsome dining room devoid of all diners, but boasting a largely dove-grey cluster of Islington folk around the bar – a wedding reception, it was: something quite intimate for around 20 people. Champagne was a feature, along with photos. Soon they would be trotting upstairs to a private room, where cake would be featured. If all this is down to me, I was panicking inwardly, then maybe the Almeida is so very slick and professional that should a computer-blind idiot mistakenly order such an event, they possibly sling in the guests by way of not just making up the numbers but sweetly rescuing said loser from feeling quite so very lonely in an otherwise abandoned restaurant.

And then my guest was waving at me – Jane Mays, consultant literary editor at the Daily Mail, a solitary presence amid a sea of white-clothed and circular tables. The wedding reception, she assured me, was no more than a coincidence – and it was nice to have it, frankly: just a little bit of bustle amid the surrounding hush. Why, I got to wondering, should the Almeida be so thoroughly empty on a sunny Tuesday lunchtime? Here, after all, is one of the highly regarded D&D group of restaurants (they who took over all of Conran's trendy set-ups, with the exception of Bibendum) and perfectly situated opposite the famous and eponymous theatre, just round the corner from groovy Upper Street and down the road from possibly even groovier Camden Passage. Well one reason, maybe,

A round of applause for the Almeida

Owned by the D&D group, which took over Conran's trendy spots, the Islington theatre's comforting restaurant serves sensational food, discovers **Joseph Connolly** – just don't attempt to book by phone



Centre-stage ... Joseph Connolly at The Almeida Restaurant.

is that they never ever answer the bloody phone. Six times I had rung them – mornings, afternoons and well into the night – and each and every time I got the engaged tone. Could they really have been constantly fielding all these frantic calls from hordes just bursting to dine there? Glancing around, I rather thought not. And that's what had driven me into the unreliable siren arms of online booking, you see, and my subsequent fear of having quite royally messed it up – or else having instead reserved. I don't know – a rosewood casket with tasteful toning satin lining from the Almeida Funeral Parlour, New South Wales.

Another, and more likely, reason for the lack of custom is the sheer and overpowering weight of local competition. Within two minutes on Upper Street alone I spotted nearly a score of eating places – Ottolenghi, the Hope & Anchor, a very froggy looking bistro called

La Petite Auberge (all claret gingham and gold etched glass, the style hijacked wholesale by Café Rouge), several chains and a rather self-consciously and deliberately dowdy place by the name of The Worker's Café (this maybe intended for all Islingtonians born with a silver greasy spoon in their mouths). As well as, I blush to tell you, The Blue Legume. I know. But to be fair to the Almeida, none of these other joints was exactly jumping. Maybe Tuesday is just a non-day around here, who can say?

So Jane and I were relaxing into the utterly deserted though still very comforting space – carpet, mirror, very zingy flowers – and getting to grips with the menu. There is a very alluring set lunch deal – £15.95 for two courses, £18.95 for three – and interestingly, all the dishes listed also appear on the rather pricier carte. Jane cleaved close to the set option, I straying only with my starter – a 'Trolley

of Charcuterie' (I thought a trolley should do it). God, it was wonderful, this – saucisson sec, three sorts of ham (rosette, coppa and Bayonne), rillettes maison (one duck and rabbit, one pork), foie gras and the most sublime chicken liver parfait I have ever tingled to. Come to think of it, I don't actually like chicken liver parfait, but this was quite literally sensational – as cool and slippery as very sexy sheets. I think I slightly offended the terribly French waiter (such an easy thing to do) by turning down both cornichons and a chutney affair: his shrug was dismissive of the whole of England. Jane had a fine terrine of ham hoch and foie gras – very flavourful, not gritty and not fatty; she also very much approved of the homemade piccalilli.

She tends to white wine, and I tend to red – so the 460ml 'pots', as they call them, were very welcome: a decent Chenin Blanc and a wildly fruity Corbieres

FACTFILE

- The Almeida Restaurant
30 Almeida Street, N1
Tel: 020-7354 4777
- Open Monday 5.30pm-10.30pm. Tuesday to Saturday noon-2.30pm, 5.30pm-10.30pm. Sunday noon-3.30pm
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆ (but better if it's full, I imagine)
- Cost: Set lunch £15.95 for two courses, £18.95 for three. Otherwise about £90 for a three-course meal for two, with wine.

at £12 and £17 respectively: pretty good value (generous, a pot is – though not enough to get potted on). I didn't finish my starter – Lord knows it was good, but there was just so much of it: if I had had more of the top rate bread and maybe a hunk of roquefort, I could have cut out the main dish altogether. But I was very pleased I didn't: braised suckling pig, chantenay carrot puree and sauteed spinach. The pig came as a modest rectangle, the meat very gorgeously gooey, the skin as crispy as a crisp. Beautifully presented too, I might say – with a curlieue of pomme puree looking rather like a polar Walnut Whip. Jane's fried sea bream with creamed leeks and a shellfish foam she declared to be just about faultless: "Delicious," she said. "Very fresh and quite firm". We shared a small bowl of Pont Neuf potatoes, which I have noticed cropping up all over the place. They put 'big chips' to shame, being one inch square and twice that in length – flowery and golden, though they might have been fried a little longer.

I had a mosey around – a brief and brisk constitutional, prior to

pudd. The kitchen is wide open to view, and seems about as large as the restaurant: a harshly-lit vista of stainless steel with quite a few chaps in togues dashing about madly and clattering, as they do. Quite for whom they were so very energetically cooking must remain a conundrum, as only one more table was occupied by this time. So what else can I tell you about the place ...? Done the white-clothed circular tables and the zingy flowers, haven't I? Oh yes – in the Gents, there is a vast and arty black-and-white photograph of a climber at Mount Rushmore, balancing on the very tip of Abraham Lincoln's nose. Designers, eh? Pudding was a shared white chocolate mousse with raspberries on a crispy shortbread base. It said raspberries, though there was only one – but a raspberry sorbet took up the slack. Jane said "Mmmm ..." quite a bit, as she scoffed this. She also said that the service was attentive, though in contrast to the seamlessness in the better Paris places, here there was "an edge of anxiety". And then she said "Have you written that down?" and I said yes Jane, I have.

It's hard to find fault with the food at this place, and the value is extraordinarily good. Although I gather it's always pretty packed in the evenings, I think it's a shame that it's empty at lunchtime – so therefore you should go there. Reserve a table now. But I wouldn't bother phoning them, if I were you – go online, and try your best not to be like me. Or else you'll end up booking a wake, somewhere else entirely.

□ *With the nights now well drawn in, you may want to read Joseph Connolly's WINTER BREAKS (Faber and Faber, £7.99) which is a sequel to SUMMER THINGS. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.*

Delicious wines that will win over any heart

AT THIS time of year, PR agencies inveigle anyone who might be thinking of writing romantic recommendations for Valentine's Day with all kinds of ideas, some of them bizarre in the extreme.

I'll spare you the details of a cheesecake stuffed with champagne and reserve judgement on a sparkling wine infused with strawberry puree (it's called Fresita and is in Costcutter and Nisa stores, £8.50). Instead, here's a white, pink and red line-up which should win the heart of your February 14 target. I know there are 10 days to go, but these bottles will need to be ordered.

First, the white. One dark, cold evening this time last year I was deep in a chalk-cut cellar alongside the river Loire tasting the base wines of a rather special fizz. Strictly speaking, Quadrille should be a pink wine – it's made from two white grape varieties and two red.

But, as with champagne, the juice of the reds is rapidly separated from the skins and the result is white.

As a pleasantly mature sparkler – the bottle I've just drunk with great enjoyment was 2001 – the even more highly regarded 2002 is currently on sale. It has taken on a delicate light gold colour. But it wears its age with elegance, a touch of honey and toast alongside subtle citrus flavours and fine bubbles spiralling up for as long as there is wine left in the glass.

Vintage Loire cremants are uncommon, but Quadrille – top cuvee from Bollinger-owned Domaine Langlois-Chateau – is uncommonly good, a perfect romantic drink. The price (£21.50, www.slurp.co.uk) reflects the care taken in selecting the chenin blanc, chardonnay, cabernet franc and cabernet

sauvignon grapes and throughout the winemaking process.

Moving on to pinks, my preferred experiences come from Provence, and these two 2009 bottles provide an



intriguing comparison.

Les Quatre Tours Signature (£8.75, www.stonevine.co.uk) makes a happy aperitif, rounded and with some richness as well as the crisp, herby, savoury yet fruity character

which characterises Provence rose.

The slightly higher acidity of Chateau Barbanau L'Instant (£9.50, www.thewinesociety.com) blossomed with food, surprisingly good with avocado – so there's an appropriate Valentine's combination (you didn't know that the Aztec name for avocado translates as testicle tree?).

But if you insist on blushing bubbles, Bisol Jeio rose prosecco is one of the best, scented and delicate (£11.25, www.bibendum-wine.co.uk).

Red romantic indulgence often means burgundy, and there will be plenty of potential in a year or two, when the voluptuous 2009s are ready. But, for now, head instead to the northern Rhone valley for something altogether more substantial, from a grape which is often regarded as sexy – syrah. Jean-Luc Colombo, grower and consultant, has

courted controversy with his forthright opinions, but his wines are deservedly praised. His vines are in Cornas, with the single-vineyard Les Ruchets (around £50) especially fascinating, complex and rewarding.

The fine 2007 is currently on sale – order from Jeroboams, Handfords or Wimbleton Wine Cellars. Or plan ahead and buy the splendid 2009 en primeur from Berry Bros & Rudd.

Finally, if you'd prefer to choose your own romantic bottle, book for the pre-Valentine's tasting on February 9 offered by The Winery in Maida Vale, which will include a Provence pink alongside pink champagne, burgundy, two of the dry German rieslings for which The Winery is renowned, and further temptations (£25, 020-7286 6475).