

SO IT'S 7.30 in the evening, and I'm in a restaurant called Trullo waiting for my blind date to roll up. A trullo is a sweet little conical building largely found in Puglia, Southern Italy – so what better name for a black flat fronted tiny restaurant set before metal crash barriers on a hateful stretch of a frightful road in a dismal slice of Highbury? My blind date was the winner of that little competition I invited all of you to enter, way back in January. Do you recall? Anyone was welcome to email me, suggesting why they would like to share a lunch or dinner, and where we might go. An initial rather worrying drought soon became a trickle, and then a veritable tsunami – and what a mixed bunch of letters! I thank you all. A few, however, rather thickly assumed that everyone who entered was guaranteed a free slap-up meal in a restaurant I'd already favourably reviewed. Others – unfortunately for them – put forward restaurants that I'd already visited, though not yet published the reviews. Interestingly, by far the most popular choices were L'Absinthe and Sardo Canale, both in Primrose Hill, and neither of which I rated at all highly.

Eventually I whittled down the list: Michel rather ruled himself out by being a vegetarian who doesn't like wine (selfish and narrow of me, I know – but it's my party, and I'll cry off if I want to), while Seamus wanted to go somewhere in Kensal Rise which had a reputation, he told me, for being a "rather alarming place – drug-related knifings and shootings". Oddly, this failed to appeal. Hugh was very charming, and wanted to go with his wife and myself to La Collina Verde in Muswell Hill, "but we must pay for ourselves". Lloyd, a designer, wrote a brilliant letter and was so very nearly the victor – adding as an afterthought that he had facial hair to rival my own, and so kissing might result in a "Velcro-esque nightmare" (though I would have insisted we remain just good friends). Barbara also came close: "I am too scared to go alone to Al Parco Pizzeria in Highgate because the waiter was so rude to me last time. I can't think of anyone else I can risk taking with me". Another Barbara was immensely flattering, so obviously I loved her immediately – and so was Sandra (you sound a very nice girl, Sandra). Cathie, on the other hand, was pretty bloody rude. She agreed with my reviews,

Blind date ends with a surprise, surprise

Rather daringly, **Joseph Connolly** picks as his competition winner a teacher who admits she sometimes finds his reviews 'smug' and 'irritating'. Undeterred, he takes her to Trullo, and then comes the bombshell



A match made in heaven? ... Joseph with Cathie Griffin.

she said, and enjoyed the humour ... though she did also find me occasionally "irritating". And "smug". And "superior. Is this the real you? I'd so love to find out". Yeh well, I thought – dream on, baby: I don't need insults, I can get all that at home. So it was Cathie I picked. I know – Freud would have a field day. What can I say? So Cathie is to be my blind date, and I'm sitting in Trullo, her suggested restaurant, waiting to find out if instead of going through with this thing, she has taken the easier option of flinging herself off a cliff.

I had heard many good things about Trullo since it opened about a year ago. It is co-owned by the chef Tim Siadatan (one of Jamie Oliver's trainees at

Fifteen, and late of St John) and Jordan. No, not as in Katie Quick (if she turned around too quickly she's smash the place to bits and put everyone's eye out) but Jordan Frieda – son of the wildly successful hairdresser John Frieda and the eternal popster Lulu, of whom I have been an ardent fan from back in the days when she still had Luvvers. Jordan is an Old Etonian who became an actor – unmemorably playing Prince William in an American miniseries – before front-of-housing at the Ruth and Rose's River Café.

So Cathie arrives, smiling bravely – though a very warm and winning smile it is. It turns out she's been a drama teacher all her life (semi-retired, though

FACTFILE

❑ **TRULLO**
300-302 St Paul's Road, N1
Tel: 020-7226 2733
❑ Open for dinner only
Monday to Friday 6.30pm-10.30pm. Saturday 12.30pm-2.30pm, 7pm-10.30pm. Sunday 12.30pm-3pm (no choice three-course Italian)
❑ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆
❑ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆
❑ The Feeling: ★☆☆☆☆☆☆☆☆
❑ Cost: In this case, zero. But assuming this to be an aberration, about £95 for a three-course meal for two, with wine.

still plying her trade in Highgate School and Channing) who loves to travel, cook, drink wine, laugh and eat out. Didn't I do well! She has two children and lives with Richard Griffin, her architect husband of 40 years, in "sort of Hornsey, sort of Highgate – we call it Lowgate". Now Trullo is all about old-fashioned Italian food, though its feel is far more tatty French bistro – white paper cloths, plain wood and really nothing else: it's not at all comfortable – just functional, and very tightly packed. The ever-changing short menu is proud of its oven and its proper charcoal grill – so from said oven, Cathie wanted the whole plaice with lemon and pangrattato (garlicked breadcrumbs), while I went for poussin from the grill with ratte potatoes, puntarelle (chicory) and morcilla (which is black pudding – though I, being an idiot, was thinking Coo, I'm on a Blind Date, and here comes more Cilla!). But to kick off with, Cathie was going for grilled ox heart ("I've been here once before when I had pig's ear"). The pasta is home made, so

I wanted papardelle with beef shin ragu. Which was terrific – perfect wide ribbons in a marvellously intense and meaty sauce: I could have eaten a big bowlful of that. Cathie loved the heart (I tasted a bit – not like offal at all: thin and nuggety) which, in dark amber offset by the orange of borlotti beans, looked like the décor in Abigail's Party. "The beans are correct", she said. "Not too al dente – and there's also spicy tomato: very good".

Unlike her plaigne: a small thing whose skin had broken, leaving very slim pickings of grossly overcooked fish – she looked dismayed, so I sent it back. Jordan came over: he hunkered down to our level and told us wide-eyed and sincerely that we were quite right in sending it back (which was bloody nice to know – but how right was he in allowing it to leave the pass?). I ate my poussin slowly, while Cathie waited. It was only okay, that poussin – on a bed of vinegary chicory it was rather dried out and tasted mainly of the charring. The replacement fish was good – much larger and silky, but still unremarkable. And we were glugging a lovely Donnafugata – rich, red and spicy, and very reasonably marked up, in common with all the wine here. We ordered puddings – prune and marsala ice cream and caramel pannacotta – while continuing to laugh like drains about all sorts of rubbish: Cathie was great company. But it was then the waiter dropped the bombshell: "Would you decide now if you want tea or coffee, as we need your table in 15 minutes". I simply stared at the man. "There's no rush ..." he faltered. Though apparently there was. Now look – I have never booked a table with a time limit on it, and I told him so. And lo – after we had eaten the very good ice cream and the equally good crème caramel – Jordan the troubleshooter was

back. We had had an espresso and required a further one – and maybe a grappa or a drop more wine. "We tell everyone about the two hour limit," he said – charmingly, but a bit damn firmly, I thought. "Well you didn't tell me". And then he asked if we would mind moving to another table, because people are waiting. "Why can't they have the other table?" "Because ... they can't. It's my restaurant: that's how it is". And then he said – amazingly – "I am not charging you for the whole of this meal". This was ridiculously and unnecessarily generous. "I always pay the bill", I said. "Well you can't". "But I really would prefer" "No". "Then I insist" "I refuse. It's my restaurant". So he's inherited Lulu's legendary strength of will – but ooh ... you know he made me want to shout! Anyway – we left. No espresso. No grappa. No wine. And no bill. Well.

It's an extremely popular restaurant, this – the very devil to secure a table, and each is retaken instantly. The attractive and able staff are well drilled in packing in the punters, and then efficiently packing them off. But Jordan might want to remember that although he does this every evening and it's "his restaurant" – it is also the punters' rare night out. A rather less schoolish and authoritarian attitude is required, I think. But still – thanks to Cathie (who stoically suffered my smugness, superiority and general irritatingness) this was a jolly good first blind date. So much so that ... do you know – I might just do it again, some time.

❑ **JACK THE LAD AND BLOODY MARY** (Faber and Faber, £8.99) is a novel by Joseph Connolly. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk, where you may also contact the author.

being grown right here in Tufnell Park

and muller-thurgau, but there are countless more which no-one can identify. Richard's own vine grew from a pip from a bunch he bought in Sainsbury's...

The success of the wine is due in no small part to the skills of Sam Linter and her team at Bolney Wine Estate in Sussex, which made the 2009 from 1.5 tonnes of grapes delivered by members in boxes and buckets and bags to Tooting Common car park and transported to the winery in a rented removal van.

But despite the worst-case discussions beforehand of how winemaking expertise could rescue poor raw material, no intervention – not even a lacing of sugar – was needed. The same was true for 2010, though a less vine-friendly summer meant

rotten grapes had to be rejected on arrival at Bolney and the final alcohol level of the wine is lower, at 10 per cent rather than its predecessor's 11.5.

Lucy hasn't yet tasted the new wine, bottled earlier this month. Experience with the 2009 showed it improved immeasurably after a couple of months' rest, so this year's uncorking ceremony of the first of the 1,296 bottles will be held in May. Again, it's pink – there has to be a minimum of a tonne of white or red grapes for separate vinification – but a white is on the horizon, with perhaps a sparkling wine later.

Membership of the Urban Wine Company has doubled in the last year, to more than 100 growers, with vines also planted at a primary school and a hospice. But

Lucy's not content to stop there. "Lots of houses in north London have mature grape vines. I want to knock on the doors and ask what they do with the grapes..."

❑ Grower members of the Urban Wine Company need to contribute at least three kilos of grape and receive six bottles of wine with personalised labels. Developer members are given a vine (solaris white or rondo red) – now is the best time to plant. Both are offered technical help, support and advice, plus the chance to buy bottles if there is a surplus. See www.urbanwineco.com for more information. The only chance for non-members to taste Chateau Tooting is likely to be at the Feast on the Bridge during September's Thames Festival.



Bubbling with enthusiasm for the project ... Lucy Baron Thomson. Picture by Nigel Sutton