

Dining with Dante is divine

FOR the purposes of this review, my name is Keats. Next week I'll be reverting to my real and wholly unpoetic monicker – but for now I must insist upon being the Bard of Hampstead. It is all the fault of the fellow I took to lunch the other day: his name is Dante. This coming so soon after my chat with the Savoy Grill's maitre d' (Byron) and the odd professional dealings with the head of Conde Nast (Nick Coleridge) together with the editor of the Evening Standard's Londoner's Diary (Sebastian Shakespeare) has proved to be all too much for me: I am left reeling, and feeling positively prosaic. So this week you must think of me as one who brings to you news of not just chicken, guinea fowl, pigeon and partridge ... but also the still clear voice of the nightingale.

Dante Mansi is the third generation owner of the pasta, pizza and (of course) ice cream restaurant that is Marine Ices in Chalk Farm – and about a thousand years ago, give or take, we both attended St Anthony's prep school in Fitzjohn's Avenue and Arkwright Road. "It wasn't a great name to have at school ..." he says, rather ruefully. But it's his surname he's talking about: "No, not great ... Mansi the Pansy. Christ". We share amazingly vivid memories of not just the worst food imaginable and random corporal punishment, but also St Anthony's staff: the odd and occasional truly inspired and wonderful teacher (Mr Bellamy, Mrs Parker) thoroughly outnumbered by an extraordinary assortment of bullies, psychotics, incompetents, men in the grip of senility and unwashed lunatics. Not to say a fully formed sadist in the form of the headmaster's wife. Ah – a golden era! I remember thinking at the time: Blimey – if these are supposed to be the happiest days of my life, I might as well top myself now, and be done with it.

But we are all grown up now, and can consort with whom we choose, while eating rather better. Which is why we were at Coast Dining, on Parkway in Camden Town. It has been here only a year, and I have been hearing a lot of good things. They specialise

Dante Mansi is the third generation owner of Marine Ices in Chalk Farm and he knows his stuff when it comes to food. Luckily, a meal out with **Joseph Connolly** at Coast Dining turns out to be more heaven than hell



A far cry from school dinners of the past ... Joseph with old school pal Dante Mansi.

in fine fresh fish, bought in daily – simply and well cooked, in equally simple surroundings: white walls, white chairs, hard floor – which I know makes it sound rather like an asylum, but there are alleviations by way of recessed mirrors fringed in fairy lights, giving off the air of a starlet's dressing table. And as you enter, there is a shallow zinc tank with a beautifully fanned out display of glistening fish, knobby oysters and one huge blushing lobster. Outside, behind iron railings strung with blue lights, there stood (on one of the coldest days of the year) two small tables sweetly and very optimistically laid for lunch. They had no takers, needless to say – but unfortunately, it was an identical story within. Throughout the whole of lunch, Dante and Keats were the only diners.

"It is tough in the daytime," admitted our waiter – who turned out to be eager, professional and

affable, as well as one of the three proprietors. As we scanned the menu, he popped another one on to the table. "These are the Healthy Options", he explained. "Oh I see," I said. "So, what – the other things will kill us?" He smiled (I think). "They shouldn't do. Let me know. We listen to the customers – love feedback". A drily witty fellow then, who certainly took an interest in our order: Dante wanted the tempura soft shell crab with chilli jam, while Keats quite fancied the idea of potted shrimps. "I wouldn't recommend the potted shrimps," the fellow declared with authority. "Bit cold, for a day like this. Why don't you have the hot seafood selection to share? There's soft shell crab amongst it". So we did – and it was very good indeed. There was also whitebait, breadcrumb goustons, crispy squid and one king prawn: now if you're going to share a thing, you can't have

just one king prawn – it could lead to an unsightly squabble. So as the host, I moved immediately to deflect just such a possibility by rapidly eating it. The house red at £18.50 was from Berry Bros – light, refreshing and full of fruit (neither Dante nor Keats giving a monkey's for the 'white wine with fish' rule).

Dante, though Italian, is a local boy: born in Primrose Hill (though not literally, he assures me). Next came Highgate, then Belsize Village, and for the last 32 years, Crouch End. He left St Benedict's in Ealing in between his O and A-levels in order to attend Westminster Catering College. "There was no pressure at all from my dad to take on Marine Ices, but I was always fascinated by food and restaurants". It was at the college that his eyes fused across a crowded room with those of a lovely young girl called Maggie: they now have been married for

FACTFILE

COAST DINING

108 Parkway, NW1
Tel: 020-7267 9555
Open Tuesday to Thursday noon-3pm, 6pm-10.30pm.
Friday noon-3pm, 6pm-11pm.
Saturday noon-11pm. Sunday noon-6pm.
Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆
Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆
The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆ (better if there are some people there)
Cost: Bargain 'healthy options' two-course lunch £12, three courses £15. Otherwise about £75 for three courses for two, with wine.

34 years. He went for the trainee management scheme at the Savoy, later working as barman at Stone's Chop House (when he learned by heart the entire contents of the legendary Savoy Cocktail Book) and then by way of the Berkeley returned to the Savoy to work in the River Restaurant. "Eventually found myself back at Marine Ices ... where I've stayed for 37 years. Still do five days a week. I like it ... though I have to say that my absolute hero is Basil Fawlty".

Dante had beer battered cod and chips, and said it was "just perfect". I sneaked a chip, which was gorgeous: golden, crunchy and potatoey. There was also, bizarrely, a peeled hard boiled egg on his plate. "I can't bear eggs," he said. "Never eat them". "Anything else you can't bear?" "No. Well – olives. Can't stand olives". And this from an Italian! "But I eat everything else. Apart from rhubarb, obviously." "And pasta ...? Pizza ...?" "Hardly any. Same with ice cream. Barely touch it". A case of familiarity breeding, methinks.

I ordered fish pie. Always a risk, this – because I measure it against the sine qua non, as served at J. Sheekey. It came very well presented – a large pie in one of those nice old-fashioned white enamel troughs with an indigo rim. It was deep and properly

gooey, very generously filled with hake, prawns, cod and salmon. The piped mash on top was just enough (so often it's all spud and no fish) and layered with toasted breadcrumbs, this topped with one grilled sardine. Alongside were finely sliced carrot and leek with a sprinkling of peas: this was an exemplary dish. Dante approved the taster that Keats had kindly given him. "Slightly reminds me of the seafood pasta in my restaurant. Which is now on the menu in the Strada chain, you know. And Cote. We used to supply Strada with ice cream ... fellow I dealt with loved my seafood pasta so much, he nicked the recipe. They don't even buy ice cream from me any more. Get cheap stuff instead."

Ah yes: ice cream. It was on the menu – and here I was with the expert. By now, the part owner had picked up the gist of our conversation: "You're ordering ice cream? Right – I'll just quickly run down to Marine Ices to get some, then". It turns out that Coast makes theirs on the premises. And the verdict? "The cherry sorbet is more like a granita ... not smooth. Flavour good, though. The vanilla ice cream ... hasn't got the texture. But the cinnamon is very good indeed. I'm very happy with that". And I was happy too. As a nice little nod to the "Coast" side of things, they round off the meal with a selection of pebbles from Brighton beach: they really do look like that – it takes an enormous leap of faith to put one in your mouth. They turn out to be very sweet chocolate – though the real downside is that they're actually as hard as a real chunk of shingle.

So – exeunt Dante and Keats, from a dedicated and serious restaurant that I really do think is something of a Marvell (when all is said and Donne).

Joseph Connolly's novel *LOVE IS STRANGE* (Faber and Faber, £7.99) in part harks back to prep school days. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

the wine stakes with the zweigelt grape

obviously food-friendly, with that cherry character giving them something of an Italian edge – and, as a group, I found them more consistently good than the blaufrankisch bottles, which ran from disappointing to delicious.

Hardly surprisingly, there won't be zweigelt on many supermarkets' shelves – with the exception of Waitrose, which has Rabl Titan 2007 (£17), rich, ripe and with serious fruit, among a remarkable selection of 11 Austrian wines, red, white and sweet. But the Rabl and most of the others are in only a very limited number of stores, so buy at www.waitrosewine.com.

Alternatively, phone 020-7036 9696 and let Hampstead resident Richard de Fleury (Dudley & de Fleury Wines, www.dudleydefleury.com) sell you

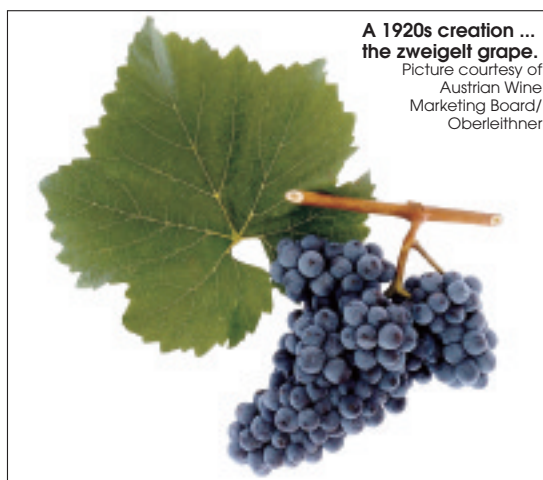
Weingut Leth's Klassik zweigelt 2008 (£14). It was my favourite at the tasting, with stand-out style, spice and silkiness. If you want to experiment further, de Fleury can offer 10 more Leth wines, including the rare roter veltliner (a blush-skinned version of Austria's best-known grape, the white gruner veltliner) in two versions, at £13 and £20.

Elsewhere, Fortnum & Mason has a generous choice, including Joseph Umatham zweigelt 2009 (£16.50, £9.50 half bottle) and blaufrankisch from highly-regarded growers Prieler and Moric, as well as Gobelsburg whites. There's also a very attractive, complex yet approachable zweigelt 2008 from Anton Bauer, approximately £13.50, among a good offering from Top Selection – phone

020-7499 4440 for details. And a juicy, lingering bargain from The Wine Society is Hans Iglar zweigelt classic 2009, £9.50.

Many restaurants are also currently promoting Austrian wine by the glass – the Bull & Last in Kentish Town is one, alongside top West End addresses (see www.wineaustralia.com).

If you want to continue the A to Z education, G and V will be easy to cover, as there's loads of gruner veltliner around. Austria is good on riesling, too, so that's R dealt with and, if you continue searching, there's B for Burgenland as well as blaufrankisch, C for Carnuntum (another of the country's many wine regions), D for DAC, a quality definition, and Danube... Persevere, the informative journey should be rewarding.



A 1920s creation ... the zweigelt grape. Picture courtesy of Austrian Wine Marketing Board/Oberleitner

"Rich, ripe and with serious fruit" ... Rabl Titan 2007 is available at Waitrose.