

HA VE you been watching MasterChef? It's such a laugh really, isn't it? What with the fact that it's all become so very formulaic and excruciatingly embarrassing in its forced pseudo-dramatic presentation. The sullen impudence of the grubby and drugged-looking John Torode, the cheeky chappy relish and gluttony of Greg Wallace – not just the luckiest man on television, but also in his unparalleled insights and wisdom, the East End's answer to Buddha. And then there's the voiceover – some spaced-out woman very much on the edge, sounding like a combination of Alice in Wonderland and the Prophet of Doom. The lowering predictability of the initial 20 contestants, following those cringeworthy and manipulatively edited auditions – and so coincidentally a perfect balance of men and women, these to include the fat one, the posh one, the black one, the oik, the loony, the looker, the methodical one, the tearful one, the arrogant one and the jumpy sulky one on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

The essential madness of all cookery programmes, of course, is that television fails to deliver on the two essentials to the appreciation of grub: smell and taste. So we just must queasily look away as Torode sticks a ridiculously overlaid fork into his gob, while a cackling and lip-smacking Greg pronounces some or other pudding "lavvy". And yet somehow, through all the awfulness, MasterChef contrives to be seriously addictive viewing. Even sitting through the contestants' dim and bovine remarks can take on a dreamlike fascination of its own: this could change my life, I am living the dream, you don't get no second chances, it's a passion, I'm in this for the long haul, it's basically all I ever wanted to do, I got to win – no messing. And how if they're sent home they'll be 'guttled', and in the meanwhile, rather worryingly, they intend to 'cook their heart out': nothing less than total evisceration, then (bless their liver and lights). Plus, but naturally, they some day hope to open a restaurant of their own. Amazing, isn't it? That people do feel that. I myself have always believed that restaurants are for going to, not owning – but still I'm so pitifully grateful that others are eager to do this thing. Take, for instance, the amiable bunch of Frenchmen I encountered just the other day in South End Green.

La Cocotte in Fleet Road is the latest incarnation of a site with form. Long ago, it used to

Frenchmen, continue to cook your heart out

With MasterChef is full swing, **Joseph Connolly** 'lives the dream' in a much more relaxing way by sampling some French delights in South End Green's La Cocotte. Altogether now, bon appetit ...



Bonjour monsieur ... Joseph thinks La Cocotte is run with love.

be Zamoyski – a Polish joint that I never visited but have been told that if you downed enough raspberry vodka, it just about erased the residual and dreadful smack of the food. Then came a much-loved Italian, Osteria Emilia. Many locals had the place

marked down as the best in NW3, so there was surprise and regret when it vanished. And now it's French, which – if done properly – is never a bad thing for a restaurant to be. The exterior is quite chic and restrained, with a rendered frontage sprouting

FACTFILE

- ❑ **LA COCOTTE**
85b Fleet Road, NW3
Tel: 020-7433 3317
- ❑ Open Tuesday 6.30pm-10.30pm, Wednesday-Saturday noon-2.30pm, 6.30pm-10.30pm, Sunday noon-3pm.
- ❑ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- ❑ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- ❑ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- ❑ Cost: Bargain set lunch at £9.50 for two courses, £12.50 for three. Otherwise for three courses with wine for two, it could rise to £90 or more.

a vertical tricolour (in contrast to the filling station right next door called Zamazingo, whose windows are plastered with Technicolor images of bright orange food, this rather reminiscent of the cluttered and insistent menu of Top Tens, Mivvis, Fruties and Cornettes that used to adorn the flanks of tinklingly musical ice cream vans). And inside La Cocotte ... a smiling, happy Bonjour from Monsieur le Patron: just what you want.

The downstairs – nicely rustic and red ginghamed – is very tiny indeed, and – at 12.45 on a Friday – already more or less full. One flight up is a larger and pleasantly airy space – vaulted ceiling with a skylight and a picture window overlooking the very smart White Horse pub, and beyond that an enlightened newsgiant obliterated by Ham&High hoardings (with a Ham&High canopy to boot). People on the top deck of passing buses can peer in to the restaurant, and wish they were here. It's not a beautiful room by any means – grey walls hung with baskets of dead wheat, a perfunctory portrait of that most famous of French women, er, Marlene Dietrich ... and a pair of split plywood Scan-

davian pendants. But the rudimentary tables are well spaced (with proper cloths and napkins), while the genuine enthusiasm of the authentic Frenchmen running the place make it all somehow much warmer, more enticing; and of course, in the background, Piaf is warblingly clearing her throat.

Half an hour later, the place was full – many brought in, I imagine, by the A-sign on the pavement offering a bargain two course lunch at £9.50. The carte is all about hearty French classics with decidedly a winter feel: very welcome if you're chilly and famished (as the English habitually are). So my wife and I were to share a plate of charcuterie, this to be followed by coq au vin for me, and for her indoors their signature dish (and, at £17.50, the most expensive): Cocotte du Pecheur. The cocotte, incidentally – a lidded cooking pot – is something of a motif: there are a few cute miniatures strewn around in a bid for ornamentation, and most dishes are served in larger versions, direct from the oven.

The charcuterie was much too dear at £11.50, and at best okay. All rather cold – a good pork terrine, Bayonne ham that would have been fine if the outer edge had not been so hard (hanging around, I suspect) and the saucisson sec was as it is. A duck rilette was actively unpleasant, however – fatty, not nice at all. Well dressed endive, cornichons and a mini bowl of rock salt were supplied, and the bread is good. Water was served in a Provençal earthenware jug, with a separate glass of ice. Their house red is a Languedoc at just £14.50 – though I upped the ante slightly, while staying within the region: a lovely light and fruity Minervois at £19.75. Behind us a lady said to her dining partner: "I don't ever take wine – it's the sulphites, you know". The man said "Oh – I hate to drink alone. I never do" – though not much later he rather thought that he could in fact manage it.

The coq au vin had been subtitled 'Bresse chicken legs

in red wine sauce with onions, lardons and mushrooms'. What was presented in a red Le Creuset pot was but a single leg, attached to the breast – traces of onion, rather than the whole little sweet ones you might expect, and a flavourful sauce that was just a tad too thin. The chicken was tender and delicious though, and came with good mash in yet another cocotte. The 'Cocotte du Pecheur' (fisherman's stew, pointedly and wisely avoiding the word 'bouillabaisse', this allowing them considerable leeway) my wife very much enjoyed – a teal coloured cocotte this time: mussels in the shell, largely, with just three prawns and two sorts of white fish. I thought the stock, the liquor, had not been sufficiently reduced, but she disagreed: she's probably right.

We shared a Tarte Tatin. The last time I dared this was at L'Absinthe in Primrose Hill, and it was a disaster. This, however, was very good indeed: no hint of clag, a dry and crispy base, thinly sliced and very well caramelised apple; the warmth was just enough to melt the vanilla ice cream and render the whole thing rather sexy. So ... what do we think? It's a good place – they're working hard, and it's run with love. But they need to raise the game to justify some prices that are on a par with Mon Plaisir and J.Sheeky, which are very much superior. Then I think that this could easily and soon become a much-loved part of the local scene. I actually quite love it already. So listen Frenchmen, and remember: you are living the dream, you don't get no second chances, it's a passion – be in this for the long haul because it's basically all you ever wanted to do. You got to win – no messing. Cook your heart out – else you'll be gutted.

❑ *THIS IS IT* (Faber and Faber £7.99) is a novel by Joseph Connolly set in Hampstead Village. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk

running rings around the opposition

biggest – though fiercely independent and famously imaginative – wine companies can't talk about their success. It's purely a business deal, and unlike the corporate sponsors who have poured millions into supporting London 2012 Bibendum mustn't use it for promotional purposes.

Themes do appear from the organisers' vision, however: they're looking for "outstanding food and drink services", with a green and English theme.

I reckon Bibendum should have no trouble with that, especially thanks to its Vivid green initiative, focusing on sustainability, lighter bottles and lower carbon emissions. It might need, though, to increase the number of English wines on its list.

Whatever the occasion, enjoyment of wine is what Bibendum is all about. Its

huge themed annual tastings are one of the highlights of the wine trade year, with serious tasting and meeting in a party atmosphere, and last year it initiated a fascinating research project to understand wine drinkers' tastes and better align its offerings to them.

The breaking news conveniently coincided with a tasting for wine writers of Bibendum's suggestions for spring and summer drinking, so here are some of my choices. All can be bought from the company website, www.bibendum-wine.co.uk, and some are available from independent merchants too.

Whites: great value in concentrated, fresh-finishing Verdicchio dei Castelli di Jesi Classico Superiore Luzano Marroti Campi 2009 (£8.75); another splendidly

stylish Italian, Bastianich Vigne Orsone friulano 2009 (£11.50); minerally rich chablis, already fine but with a complexity which promises further pleasures with a little more maturity, Terroir de Courgis Patrick Piuze 2009 (£14.50); herby, apricot appeal in A Coroa godello 2009 (£12.50), from Spain's cool Galicia region; lingeringly long Huia sauvignon blanc 2010 (£11.75) whose classic Kiwi aromatics are delicate and restrained; and a final bargain from South Africa, Stellenrust chenin blanc 2010 (£8.75), a rounded, fresh, apple-and-spice Fairtrade wine.

Reds: ravishing from colour through scent to flavour, Crozes Hermitage Domaine du Colombier 2009 (£15.50); smart, smoky-fruited Montepulciano d'Abruzzo Vignafance Fratelli Barba 2007 (£12.75);

approachable and enjoyably restrained St Hallett Garden of Eden shiraz 2008 (£11); and finally a wine which shatters all preconceptions about South African reds – Sijnn 2007 (£18.50), an eclectic blend including shiraz, mourvedre and touriga nacional, leafy scented and fascinating on the palate.

Comfortingly, only one of these wines is more than 13.5pc alcohol, and several don't reach 13pc: knock-out quality but not knock-out character.

❑ *Specially for Ham&High readers, Bibendum will offer single bottles rather than full cases on these wines provided a minimum of six bottles are ordered. Also, orders can be collected from the Bibendum office (020-7449 4120) for free (within a week of ordering).*



Highlight ... The poster for the 2011 Bibendum annual trade tasting.