

The point is, there isn't one

ABOUT a thousand years ago, Fairfax Road was famous – for here was the place of plunder, the land of loot: the Green Shield Stamp redemption centre! Green Shield Stamps! Anyone out there old enough to remember them? They were such a big thing in the sixties. There were, of course, many big things in the sixties: I was besotted with The Beatles, though my dedication was as nothing when set aside my mother's devotion at the altar of Green Shield Stamps.

Up until 1963, pretty much the only place to buy groceries in Finchley Road was the food hall in the basement of John Barnes (in the days when John Barnes was not merely a department store, but the one true answer to the Meaning of Life, the Universe, and Everything). There were one or two specialist shops – a delicatessen called Ken & Marie, Beverley for coffee and Les-siter for the best choes ever – but really, John Barnes was it. And then, spat on to the street, came the vulgar gobbet whose name was Tesco – and by God in those days Tesco was rough: not at all the sleek and mega behemoth it is nowadays (did you know that today, out of every £10 spent in Britain, £11 goes to Tesco?). Then it was a dingy little chain that cleaved very closely to the maxim of its founder, Jack Cohen: pile it high, sell it cheap. And so in normal circumstances, NW3 would collectively have turned up its already markedly retrousse nose at it. But, you see ... Tesco doled out Green Shield Stamps! And that – overnight – changed everything.

During the Tesco years – before my mother, a contrite and wiser woman, inevitably returned to the warm and forgiving embrace of our saviour, St John of Barnes – we chewed our way through mountains of indeterminate meat, whiffy fish and the sort of fruit that used to be held in reserve for hurling at unfortunates locked in stocks. But on the plus side, you see ... Tesco doled out Green Shield Stamps! The collecting of which was so very preposterous a lark. Each stamp was a reward for a spend of 6d, so most women's purses were stuffed to overflowing with reams of green-printed and perforated gumminess, all of

Once a very popular restaurant which made diners salivate at its name, Chateaubriand disappointed **Joseph Connolly** by not even stocking, well, chateaubriand. The reason? There's no point, apparently...



Not a chateaubriand in sight ... Joseph Connolly likes his steak – when there is some.

which would have passed though countless pairs of loathsome hands before being given to a credulous and frankly idiotic child to lick, and stick into books. Me, of course. One book held 1,280 stamps – this representing an outlay of £32, at a time when the average weekly wage was maybe half of that. One book got you things like a record rack or a cigarette box, though most of the stuff in the gift catalogue was far more aspirational. Silver plate featured a good deal, most hilariously in a container for a box of After Eights – this with wheels, the better to scoot across the G-Plan table in the tastefully knocked-through dinette. And even at the time I thought it hysterical that Green Shield should offer a motor boat. For this you would have required 170 books, which meant you had to spend £5440 – this then the price of a small 19th century terraced house in Hampstead Village. And get this: the motor boat came without a motor!

Anyway, all this kookiness ended 10 years later when Green

Shield Stamps morphed into Argos, and Fairfax Road was troubled no longer by queues of fat and pasty people stuffed with condemned veal and beans from rusted tins openly lusting for a Kenwood Chef – and now the place is given over to a tight-knit cluster of shops devoted to interiors – flooring, bathrooms, quite weird furniture as last seen in Thunderbirds – and a modest clutch of well-established eating places, one of which I recently went to. Chateaubriand – or Peter's Chateaubriand, seemingly dependent upon their mood – long ago used to be a very popular restaurant in Belsize Village specialising, not too surprisingly, in chateaubriand (the centre and best cut of fillet of beef, and damn yummy too). My chum Max had just flown in (he owns a travel company in Canada and is generally flying into or out of all sorts of places) and at the mention of the restaurant's name, he was visibly slaving. And on the website, sure enough the chateaubriand is the star of the show, amply backed up by

many other beefy delights. Mmm, yes ... but on a Tuesday evening, we were informed by the very amiable fellow who runs the place that this menu applied only to weekends. Oh. So, what ... no chateaubriand, then? He sighed his regret. "What's the point?" he declaimed, rather tragically. "In a year I sell maybe five. So what's the point? Who wants to spend £45, these days?" Leaving aside the fact that on the website it is listed at £39, I expressed a happy willingness to do so ... but the cupboard was bare. They couldn't even run to a couple of steaks. So, as Max sobbed openly, from a laminated set menu we glumly chose a pate de maison and gravadlax to start, followed by steak and kidney pie and wiener Schnitzel. The wine list ran to just four reds ... but there must be others ...? "But what's the point?" the man now was wailing. "I used to have £40,000-worth of wine downstairs. No one ordered it. So what's the point?" While Max, I could see, was asking himself frankly what in fact was the point of us being here in the

FACTFILE

CHATEAUBRIAND

65 Fairfax Road, NW6
Tel: 020-7624 5142

Open every day 12-3.30pm, 6-11pm, though closed for Saturday lunch (one of the few times you might have hoped for the Chateaubriand: never mind).

Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆

Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆

The Feeling:

★★★★★☆☆☆☆

Cost: Two courses £13.95, three courses £15.95. More if you happen to strike one of the few days (weekends) when a proper menu is on offer.

first place, I rapidly ordered a bottle of what I considered to be the best on offer – a Fleurie, at £22.

We were sitting at one of two tables in the window – the only ones in the whole place not to have a cloth. All the others actually boasted two apiece, which seemed quite greedy. Soon our neighbouring table was occupied by two old women and an old man. They ordered tap water. A jug of tap water was on all of the six or so other tables that were taken: I didn't see any wine. And then the poor old sod who runs this place was back with the news that there was no Fleurie. Christ. "But you can have a bottle of Beaujolais on the house". "I don't want it on the house", I said. "You must," he insisted. "I just feel so bad about everything ..." I nearly wept. Instead, I ate the gravadlax, which was actually pretty good, if very chilly. Max's pate was more of a very livery parfait, but he likes liver, thank God. And the rest? The 'pie' came as a bowl of steak and kidney topped by a small square of puff pastry. "It's ... okay," said Max. "It's tender. Enough kidney. But there's more salt in here than anything." My Schnitzel was in the form of two smallish lozenges, which reminded me of something from long ago: KFC, I'm afraid – but in fairness, KFC used then to be

an abiding and guilty pleasure of mine. I looked about me: it's rather like a genteel provincial boarding house's front room: the people next to us looked very at home. One of the old women said "I like the veal. Do you two ever eat steak?" and the other old woman said "Very rarely" and the old man said "I like it well done" and the second old woman said "I didn't mean that, you fool" and the first old woman said "What's he got?" and the second old woman said "Same as me: he's got the veal" and the first old woman said "No, I mean – what's he got? What's wrong with him?" and the second old woman said "I can't remember – I think it's Parkinson's" and the old man said "Those bloody pills – they don't bloody work for a start" and the first old woman said "My cousin, he's got Motor Neurone. He got it just before I had my breakdown". So yes indeed, folks – a riproaring and fun-packed night out, in downtown Fairfax Road.

The attractive though virtually non-English-speaking and thoroughly unsmiling waitress brought me 'pancake with hot cherry sauce' – two small spongy ready-made discs, gloopy sauce with unpitted cherries; Max's ice cream was very Wallys. Look – it's cheap enough here, God knows – but they've either got to change their name from Chateaubriand to something like Pot Luck, or else make it plain to all that their much touted speciality, along with most other good things, is almost constantly unavailable.

And when the bill came, once more the dear man refused to let me pay for the wine because, he said "I want you to come back". Lordy, Lordy, Lordy. And so we wandered away, stunned and peckish, from one of the most resolutely untouched and old-fashioned restaurants I have been to in years: a veritable throwback. I half expected them to be doling out Green Shield Stamps.

POOR SOULS (Faber and Faber, £7.99) is the first of Joseph Connolly's ten novels. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk

around these Turkish delights

The answer, surely, is easy-to-say brands. Turkey should have no problems there – think sultan, minaret and all the other holiday brochure cliché words.

A number of classic vine varieties are planted, but it's the multitude of indigenous varieties, some of which might well be ancestors of some very familiar grapes, which are the character of the country.

Of the whites, emir has a broad fruit profile and narince expands that to include a touch of herbs and nuts, and both work well with oily fish, chicken and various salads.

Red kalecik karasi has bright

red berry fruit and is good with tomato-based food; okuzgozu and bogazkere add in darker chocolate and cherry scents and flavours, plus spice, and match substantial meaty dishes. And that's only the beginning – there are around 30 main wine grapes, in a total of 600 to 800 genetically different grape varieties in Turkey.

It's understandable that progress towards today's level has been slow, for while Turkey is the world's sixth-largest producer of grapes, only around two per cent of the 3.8 million ton crop ends up as wine. Average wine consumption is a mere one litre a head a year (here, it's

nearer 30, in France close to 60). And the tax on a bottle in Turkey is formidable.

But now is the moment to discover the "new" Turkey. With luck, one or two high street retailers will dip in soon, but meanwhile – restaurants and specialist grocers apart – the best choice is online, where www.tasteturkey.com has a great selection.

A good start would be a mixed 12-bottle case from Doluca, whose wines I particularly like, or Kavaklidere, both big and respected producers. Each costs around £95 with delivery. Or choose individual bottles (minimum of 12) from the detailed list.

And, yes, Buzbag still exists. The basic blend (£6.50) is out of stock at Taste Turkey, but the upmarket Reserve (£13) is there. There was even a vertical tasting of three vintages at the Wines from Turkey event – something more familiar in Bordeaux and a solid indication of progress.



Great grapes ... the harvest in Turkey, above, and emir, the easy-to-say grape, left.