

I'll have what the bride is going to ...

Before her big day tomorrow, the Royal bride-to-be and her parents will be spending tonight at that Great British institution The Goring. So **Joseph Connolly** felt it his duty to check it out

AND so it is finally come ...! The planning, the waiting, all our girlishly sleepless nights are at last at an end – for tomorrow there dawns the most fabulous day of the year. Yes, that one – the one, according to a foaming-mouthed media, you have been longing for and dreaming of, to the exclusion of all else: the nuptials of His Royal Highness Wills the Prince, to Katie-who-no-longer-has-to-waitie, the pretty young thing with the smile, the hair, the legs, and hitherto 'A Commoner'. Which of course is all about to change: as I write, we don't yet know what title will be conferred upon the happy couple. A dukedom is normal – Clarence, Cambridge, Sussex and Connaught have all been mooted, though as I gather Kate (or Catherine, as now we must think of her) has lately been schooled in all the traditional upper class and rural pursuits, they might do worse than to summon up Jilly Cooper's own county: the Duke and Duchess of Rutshire: it has a certain ring.

There are umbrous rumblings abroad, however, that not the whole nation has been pining for the morrow: I have heard of some who are quitting the country for the weekend, so as to escape from all of the brouhaha. This seems to be taking Guardian-reading republicanism to rather a comical extreme: this Royal wedding is, after all, to be beamed to billions throughout the world, and probably also in Heaven and on Mars – but if one really wishes to witness no single part of the

thing, all one has to do is not turn on the television. No strong-arm Monarchs will come pounding on your door demanding that you wave a flag and purchase at the very least a commemorative tea towel.

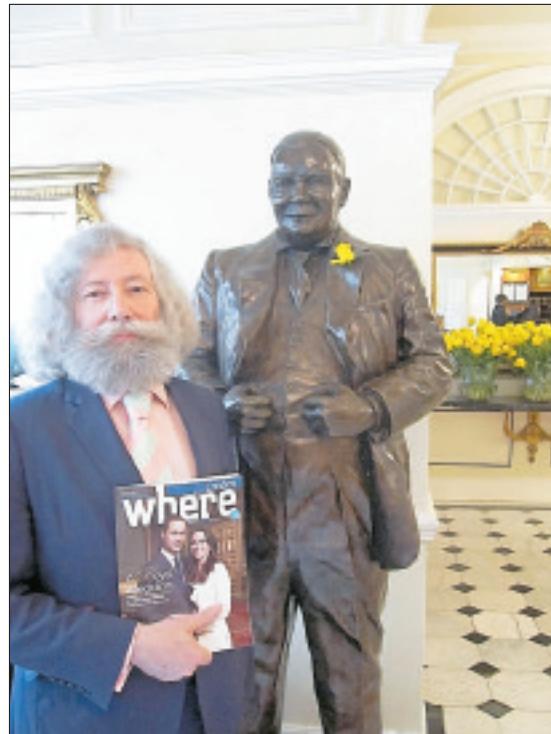
Ah yes ... the memorabilia. Teetering piles of tasteless porcelain bearing lovey-dovey portraits with the entwined cypher, CW – which yes makes you think of whining and endless Country & Western tunes, but still we can all agree that it's a whole lot better than WC. There doesn't seem to be anything amusing on sale, though – unlike when the Prince of Wales got married for the first time to, um ... oh God – what was her name again? Oh yeh – Diana, that was it (how one forgets, eh?). I bought a fabulous mug bearing a cartoon of Charles by Marc, the handle being in the form of one of his famously large and jutting out ears (which did you notice? – have for a long time been, though still large, not jutting out, this no doubt the result of sheer regal willpower on his part). I wouldn't have minded one of the batch of mugs made in China and illustrated with lovey-dovey portraits of Catherine Middleton and Prince Harry, but they've all been snapped up. Anyway, I'm sure the Queen is very happy about the whole thing, not least because in contrast to others within the family, Prince William appears to have selected a woman who is, so far as one can tell, actually sane.

And today, even as we speak, the favoured guests for the event itself are descending upon London, eager for a feed and a

good night's sleep, prior to the Great Day. And the very most favoured of the favoured will be spending tonight at the block-booked Goring Hotel, hard by Buckingham Palace – these to include not just the parents of the bride-to-be but the blushing bride-to-be herself. Well gosh! And so in the light of all this – and on your behalf – I felt it my duty to check out the place: to assure myself, and you, that the guests will indeed be treated Right Royally.

But of course when it comes to The Firm – as Prince Philip has christened the family – the Goring has form. Her Majesty has frequently entertained here, and it was a great favourite of the Queen Mother, of whom there is a very fetching bust in the lobby. And where does the dining room turn to when in search of beef? Why the Castle of Mey estate, of course – the Queen Mother's favourite home. And the designer of said dining room? Lord Linley – nephew to the Queen, and carpenter to the gentry. It is actually a very beautiful room – cream and white, high-ceilinged, fluted and pilastered and swagged and urned, the tall windows framed by thickly-padded lemon and dove silk curtains. The only false note – and it was struck at the room's unveiling five years ago and stubbornly persists in clankingly spoiling it – is the pair of perfectly silly Swarovski crystal so-called chandeliers which resemble random twig-shapes that twinkle with what I imagine is supposed to be cherry blossom: they are like giant twisted versions of those little

sticks encrusted with tinted sugar crystals, which you swirl into your cappuccino. The food is proudly and outstandingly British. A stand-up card separate to the menu itemises the provenance of not just meat and fish, but also the vegetables. Yet another card – with a Union Jacked truckle as its cover motif – lists all of the cheeses, some of them rather rare. The £36 three course set lunch menu is littered with such Great British platefuls as jellied eels, Monday Jug – a sort of beef brisket stew – and steamed treacle and lemon sponge. There is every day a 'special' on the gleaming silver trolley ... and on the Thursday my wife and I were there, wouldn't it just be the aforementioned Castle of Mey rib of beef: so obviously I had to have that. But first, the most sensational glazed lobster omelette – small, thickish, sweet and nuggety: just runny enough, and thoroughly gorgeous. My wife was starting with a chickweed and wild mushroom salad with poached duck egg and tarragon dressing. She struck lucky in the soft and creamy egg having a double yolk – though maybe because of



A toast to the happy couple ... Joseph Connolly with the statue of the hotel and restaurant's founding father.

this she felt that there could have been something on the lines of a bed of brioche: the leaves, fine though they were, could not really cope with absorbing all of that eggy goodness.

Two very satisfactorily large rib joints pouted alluringly from under the cowl of the trolley – you get a choice of rare, or not so. The slices are generous and meltingly pleasing, with a Yorkshire pud the size of a drum, some nice roast potatoes and fresh crunchy cabbage. My wife had roast fillet of Dorset plaice in nut brown butter with spinach, artichoke, tomato and rissolee potatoes: the presentation was enticingly beautiful. She put down her glass – I had found a very decent Chapoutier Cotes du Rhone at £32 on a list that goes up to infinity – and said quite sighingly: "This is the best place ever!". I looked about me: all the tables were taken by well turned out regulars of a certain age and a spatter of families, the chairs were deeply comfortable, the table setting – no flowers, but a clear crystal obelisk – restrained and perfect, the service excellent. "You're right. It is". "Well

FACTFILE

THE GORING HOTEL
Beeston Place, SW1
Tel: 020-7396 9000
Open for Lunch Sunday to Friday 12.30pm-2.30pm. Dinner daily 6pm-10pm.
Food: ★★★★★★★★★★
Service: ★★★★★★★★★★
The Feeling: ★★★★★★★★★★
Cost: Set three-course lunch £36, £41 on Sundays. Set three-course dinner £48.50. Affordable wines are there, but not nearly so many as the unaffordable ones.

actually I said that this is the best *place* ever, but yes – it's that too".

The cheese trolley – it's all from Paxton & Whitfield and, refreshingly, there is no supplement – was not as gloriously crammed as I remember it from previous occasions, though the Auld Lochnagar – a hard Scottish cheese the colour of a Belisha Beacon – was first rate, as was Wigmore – sheep – and, as ever, Montgomery's cheddar. What was rather shameful though was a tiny triangle of rather old Cropwell Bishop Stilton – all that was on offer, and not good at all. Then we shared something called a Black Forest trifle: nice sour cherry goo at its base, good chocolate mousse, akin to a Sachertorte ... but no way was this a trifle, lacking as it did any hint of cakiness.

So the Royal Family and their guests will no doubt be relieved and gratified to know that following my rigorous vetting of their chosen venue, I am able to give this 100-year-old independent and very fine hotel and restaurant – still in the ownership of the Goring family (the original founding Goring the gentleman I am standing next to in the picture – a pretty much unqualified thumbs-up. Which is just as well, really: cutting it a bit fine to change things now. Right, then: so all please rise, ladies and gentlemen, and let us toast the marriage of a future King and Queen – and let us also pray that tomorrow the weather gods plan to bring sunshine, and do not malevolently long to rain over us.

LOVE IS STRANGE (Faber and Faber, £7.99) is a novel by Joseph Connolly. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

Challenge sees 12,000 wines going for gold

AT THIS time of year, the wine trade becomes unusually competitive. It's decision moment in several of the major medal-awarding contests in the UK – wine competitions which are widely respected way beyond our borders.

The one I'm involved with is the International Wine Challenge, the biggest blind wine tasting in the world, whose 2011 medal stickers will begin appearing on winning wines from late next month.

I still remember very clearly my trepidation the first time I judged, in 1994, on an unoccupied floor of a posh apartment development – the IWC organisers have been adept at locating empty spaces, though the unoccupied Docklands office block which stank of new paint



is best forgotten. Now, it all happens in a Barbican exhibition hall, home this year to a record 12,000-plus wines and about 400 judges.

It's still a somewhat intimidating experience for IWC virgins. But Challenge decisions are made on consensus, emphasises Charles Metcalfe, co-founder of the competition in 1984 and one of the expert team

which directs the event.

Discussion on the verdicts starts only when each member of a judging panel has completed tasting each line-up of wines – and the newest associate judges have as strong a voice as Masters of Wine and trade stalwarts.

This year, I judged on the first day of the week one elimination round and, again, a week later when the first medal winners were selected. It was a remarkable microcosm of the world of wine and brought experiences I've never before encountered: pinks from China and Mexico, for example, and Croatian dessert wines.

The two days were also proof of how a good competition has evolved into one planned and executed with remarkable fairness, thoroughness and

thoughtfulness. It is, one judge commented, the most democratic of wine competitions.

Gone are the years when a day in week one would have been an unending succession of harshly acidic whites or over-the-top tannic reds. Now variety keeps the palate refreshed and stimulates intense consideration of every set of wines. The bottles-in-bags, which come in like-style groupings, can move directly from champagne to Chilean cabernet, Sicilian reds to sherry, Sancerre to opulent sweet wines.

This year, we judges on tables 16 and 17 (there were 21 tables, each comprising four or five judges with credentials ranging through wine making, wine selling, wine writing and other relevant professional skills) had

a memorably diverse palate test.

The first morning's whites included cavas and Italian native varieties, the reds Chilean pinot, cabernet and syrah plus spatburgunder and blends from Lebanon. After lunch came assorted pinks, reds from three continents, and the Croatian stickers: anyone for plavec mal?

Day six brought more classic styles, among them English sparklers, some smart chiantis and – highlight of the day – a wonderful line-up of northern Italian nebbiolos, which perfectly fitted judging panel chairman Simon Woods' definition of gold medal-winning wines: ones you'd want to buy by the case.

The two days were a fascinating experience and not just for the variety – the quality

was often impressive, which is immensely encouraging in terms of what is likely to be on sale in months to come.

The downside of choosing the IWC 2011 as the subject of this column is that I can't yet recommend any of the medal-winning wines – that has to wait until the results announcement on May 17.

But one final word of caution: the fact that wines bear medal stickers doesn't necessarily mean that they are way ahead of less-adorned bottles. Those may be just as good but their makers and promoters have chosen not to put them through the competition hoop. But if the IWC stickers are there, be confident that they are well deserved.

LIZ SAGUES