

# The nuts and bolts are missing here

**W**EST Hampstead is cool! West Hampstead is hot! This is what people have been telling me – and particularly people who live round there. Get yourself down to West Hampstead, they cry as one, and so very evangelically: go there in the evening, Friday preferably – I'm telling you! It's cool! It's hot! Well I do rather go for cool, and nor am I an enemy of hot ... and so just the other Friday evening, that's where I was – meeting in a bar in West End Lane called The Alice House (which immediately made me think, oh yeah: "Drink Me") with my travel writer pal from the Daily Telegraph, Adrian Bridge, who lives just round the corner.

But we weren't meant to be in West Hampstead at all, that's the funny thing. We had been all geared up in an unspeakably funky night out in downtown, um – well Crouch End, actually. Because I'd read about this place called Bouga, see – Moroccan inspired cuisine, and on Friday nights there was a floorshow involving a bellydancer! What could be more fun than that? So I tried to book about a month ago but they were just on the verge of closing for "sort of ten days" for refurbishment. So I booked instead for one month hence. "Oh yes," said the woman on the phone, "we ought to be open by then ...". Which didn't charge me with confidence, I have to say. So two days before we were due to have a bellyful, I rang the place to assure myself that all was well. Engaged tone. Over the next two days I must have rung them, ooh – a dozen times at least: engaged tone. And no email would 'submit'. So what was happening? Has Bouga gone belly-up, do we think? Who can say? Anyway, I wasn't taking the risk of rolling up to a derelict casbah, so I thought we'd go to

Having heard about West Hampstead's ever-increasing hipness, **Joseph Connolly** heads to Walnut. Sadly, they've not even begun to crack the basics of service and good cooking yet

Adrian's manor instead (what with it being a Friday, and West Hampstead therefore shimmering at its peak of not just cool but also hot). I had heard that Walnut was a very popular upper end sort of a place – it's been here for nearly ten years and prides itself on 'local, seasonal and sustainable' food. But would I get a table at such very short notice – for this very evening, indeed? Well yes, no problem.

But first we were in The Alice House – which even early in the evening is a very busy, fun and buzzy place, with all the concomitant noise levels. Adrian said "What bottled beers do you have?" and the barman said "draught or bottled?" and Adrian said "bottled" and the barman said "did you say bottled?" and Adrian said "yes, bottled" and the barman said "you're wanting bottled, yeh?". So all of that took an age. We were leaning against the poured concrete bar, and a charming hovering waitress offered to find us a seat. This might have been less solicitousness on her part than an awareness of my being the oldest person in the room by about thirty years: she may have sensed that collapse might be imminent. Anyway – I liked that place, but now we were hungry: so Walnut.

For a reputedly higher end place – and almost certainly the most expensive restaurant in the area – the frontage comes as something of a shock. It comprises one great (walnut coloured) folding patio door – which maybe in summer they gaily throw open to absolutely nothing at all – this surmounted by an eau de nil fascia whose paint is flaking like scabies. Inside

is an awkward semi-trapezium of a space – all a rather shabby white apart from (walnut coloured) clunky tables and chairs and three cylindrical red pendants, one of which wasn't working. This sort of sloppy approach simply drives me crazy: change the bloody light bulb, why don't you? Well maybe they knew that on this so hot and cool West Hampstead Friday night only four tables would be taken, and here was a nod in the direction of economy.

We were shown to the window table by a fresh-faced and ridiculously young man who had the air of being very surprised indeed to find himself in this place. The table was bare, the glasses and cutlery of the cheapest and ugliest sort. There was just one special on tonight, the young man was distantly remembering: fillet of lamb. "Uh-huh," I said. "Roasted, is it? Grilled?" His distraction deepened into something close to bewilderment. "Fried, I think ... And roasted. Not sure. I can check ...". "Maybe sealed in a pan, and then put in the oven?" I suggested. He nodded with energy. "Mm. You might well be right". Anyway, Adrian ordered that – to be preceded by 'steamed Scottish rope grown mussels with garlic, white wine, parsley and cream'. Moules marinières, then. And I was having a broccoli and Stilton soufflé – for which I was warned there would be a twenty minute wait – and then venison Wellington with game pate and wild mushrooms in short pastry, and a veal jus.

I ordered a glass of white, and a bottle of red, and had to ask for bread; ten minutes later – nothing. Ho hum. Asked again.

## FACTFILE

❑ **WALNUT**  
280 West End Lane, NW6  
Tel: 020-7794 7772  
❑ Open Tuesday to Saturday  
6.30pm-10.30pm  
❑ Food: ★★☆☆☆☆  
❑ Service: ★★☆☆☆☆  
❑ The Feeling:  
☆☆☆☆☆☆  
❑ Cost: About £110 for a three course meal for two, with wine.

Eventually the basket came along with the bottle of red. We had a young girl serving us now, who said she hadn't been told about the glass of white. Ho hum. Adrian's mussels were clearly good – plump and fairly plentiful, the sauce much approved of. My soufflé came in a tiny ramekin, and had a promisingly puffed-up head to it. The first spoonful was okay, but deeper into the thing all moussiness had dissipated, and we were left with a collapsed and claggy over-cheesy goo. Adrian had done the right thing, ordering the special: two lean truncheonettes of lamb fillet, chopped thickly, and just pink enough. He was enjoying that, alongside rather pricey sides of gratin dauphinois and courgettes Provençale. And I was pleased for him, I really was. Yes I was: really, really pleased. I could not have been more pleased for him, even as I laid down my knife and fork one-and-a-half mouthfuls into this venison Wellington thing. Dear God, what an abomination. Where do I begin ...? Well at the outside, I suppose, and then work my way very horribly in. The



Driven nuts ... Joseph at Walnut.

'short pastry' was uncrisp, unlight, greasy and semi-cooked – just as you would find on the worst sort of sausage roll bought in a garage last thing at night when you're just simply starving. The internal pate smearing was heavy-handed, and actually just this side of repellant. And the venison, oh God the venison ... mostly virtually raw, and packed with sinew. I ate three of the accompanying chips: you've heard of thrice-cooked? Well these hadn't even been done the once – flaccid, oily and palely loitering ... oh look, I would have sent the whole bloody lot back, but a huge sort of ennui and depression had suddenly overcome me. The kitchen here is open, elevated and at the back: you can see the chefs, and the chefs can see you. They happily sent out this stuff, saw it returning, uneaten ... and the rest is silence. At some point Adrian had to ask the dreamy boy-waiter to clean off the table, which he did with a wet and pink screwed-up grubby pink J-Cloth. I'm telling you: the missing light bulb is the least of this place's problems.

We shared a 'chocolate tart' the size of a digestive biscuit, with a similarly thick and crunchy base. There was no hit whatever of chocolate on the palate – so that was abandoned as well. And then I got the bill: we had tap water, one pudding and no coffee – £100, with service, and I hadn't actually eaten any dinner. "No wonder this place is practically empty," I said. "I walk past here nearly every evening," said Adrian. "Compared with most times, it's heaving tonight".

While later strolling down West End Lane in search of a taxi, I passed loads of attractive eating places and intriguing drinking places, most of them packed. So I concur with the local rallying call: West Hampstead is cool! West Hampstead is hot! And Walnut struggles to be lukewarm, at best.

❑ *Joseph Connolly's latest novel is JACK THE LAD AND BLOODY MARY (Faber and Faber, £8.99). All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk, where comments may also be left.*

# This white offers grape escape this summer

**E**VERY year or so, an alternative white grape variety is lauded as the "next sauvignon blanc" or the "new chardonnay": anything to dent the supremacy of the famous and familiar. Pinot grigio is an obvious winner, fiano has also boosted Italian sales and, further up the price scale, Spain's albarino is edging in.

But how about picpoul? Easy to say – and enjoyable to drink in the not-too-challenging way which is necessary for substantial sales. The grape does have more than the simplest charms, however.

Pay it a bit of attention and you should find scents of flowers (honeysuckle or orange blossom, perhaps) and rounded, gently rich fruit flavours with a herby edge, alongside the citrusy crispness which gives picpoul its name – in Occitan, it means "lip stinger".

And Occitan provides the clue to the wine to search out: picpoul de pinet. Its vineyards cover the limestone plateau behind the flamingo lakes of the French Mediterranean coast between Agde and Sete, with the village of Pinet the central point. Not surprisingly, given that those vineyards overlook the shellfish beds, picpoul de pinet works particularly well with oysters, mussels and other fishy flavours, plus salads or simply on its own as a summery aperitif. It's also increasingly available here.

So I decided to put its charms to a consumer test, serving it to a group of wine-drinking friends, some with well-developed tastes, others less experienced. I sourced nine readily available bottles (a big thank-you to all the suppliers) and first we tasted them alone, everyone using an elimination system to reduce the nine to three

and then to one. The wines from independent growers proved generally more popular

than those from co-operatives, but there wasn't a stand-out winner, with equal votes for the top two (different cuvees from the same domaine). Nor were any wines regarded as real duds.

Pleasant (rather than boring) consistency seemed the rule – and it was the same with price. The average was £7.50 and the cheapest and dearest were within

75p of that, so to save ink I haven't give individual figures in the details below.

Consistency continues in the presentation – the tall, slim, emerald green picpoul de pinet bottle with embossed Languedoc cross (the appellation fits into the Languedoc's new grand vin category) and wavy neck moulding invoking the maritime location is easily

recognisable. Sensible marketing, commented a commercially-savvy taster. Then we moved on to the

added pleasure of drinking the wines, with a generous Mediterranean buffet, including – of course – oysters.

But to business: the facts. Bottles from the Jourdan family were the most popular (Domaine Felines, Waitrose, and Domaine Felines Jourdan, the Wine Society, both lovely, with stylish fruit and elegant balance. My favourite was the very aromatic Domaine des Lauriers (www.tanners-wine.co.uk) with its soft, citrusy length, and it was generally a popular second or third choice behind the two Felines bottles.

Also nudging the top two was Cressys (www.stonevine.co.uk), full-flavoured and refreshing, and Tesco's \*Finest also had supporters – as one of the 2010 minority (most were 2009 vintage) its youthful vibrancy was probably the reason.

All the others should please, too, so here's the list: Domaine de la Viste, Jeroboams; La Cote Flamenc, www.bibendum-wine.co.uk; Rocs Blancs, Majestic; Cyrice, www.marksandspencer.com – online only.

Those Mediterranean slopes are by far the world's largest picpoul vineyard. The only example I've tasted from elsewhere – and it was very good – was Spanish, but there must be other terroirs where the grape could flourish.

Will picpoul ever truly challenge the big names? That might be optimistic, but as a very enjoyable summer wine, from aperitif through salads and things fishy (and even mushroom risotto, as I discovered the next day with some liquid leftovers), it's good, and good value.

LIZ SAGUES

