

A festival of food on the spot where the nation celebrated its newly-won peace

I don't know ...maybe what all we Londoners need now is a fully fledged festival. It seemed to work for us exactly 60 years ago in May 1951, when there arose on the South Bank from a desolate bombsite the most joyous and colourful array of groundbreaking architecture calculated to showcase the very best of what Great Britain still could produce, while – more importantly – supplying a playground for a pretty hard-pressed nation. Here people could wander about the Dome of Discovery (at the time the largest on earth) enjoy a ride on Rowland Emmett's wonky railway and consume a great many Wall's ice cream cones while cooling their feet in a colour-changing fountain. The centrepiece was Skylon – a lit-up, wholly useless but memorably elegant 300 foot structure resembling a vertical zeppelin. It was, according to a wag of the time, the quintessential physical expression of the country, in that it too was lacking any visible means of support. The night before the official Royal opening of the Festival of Britain, some brave lunatic shimmied up the entire sheerness of the thing and tied around its point a University of London scarf.

Demolition

The hugely popular exhibition closed after only five months, when the newly elected Conservative government under the leadership of Winston Churchill decreed its demolition. He saw it only as propaganda for the outgoing Labour mob, and wanted shot of it. It was suggested that Skylon could be re-erected elsewhere, but eventually it was dumped into the river Lea. In the sixties, when in the face of furious public opposition led by John Betjeman, the wonderful and massive Euston Arch was destroyed, this too was thrown into another river. There are currently efforts in place to raise and reassemble both structures, but don't hold your breath.

The only building spared the wrecker's ball was the much-loved Royal Festival Hall – now Grade II listed and, in 2007, the subject of comprehensive refurbishment. This took in the creation of a large and airy riverside restaurant designed by Conran & Partners, and called – in homage to its one-time neighbour – Skylon. So I thought, on this sixtieth anniversary of these Thameside shenanigans, I'd toddle along. Though in order to reach it, you first have to brave 1960s Brutalism at its very most threatening and lowering worst. Sometimes, the Hayward Gallery strikes me as so very wilfully ugly and insulting

The centrepiece of the 1951 Festival of Britain was the 300ft sculpture Skylon – so where better to head to mark the jubilee than a restaurant named in its honour, writes **Joseph Connolly**



■ Joseph with Anna Nash at Skylon in the South Bank's Royal Festival Hall.

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to London – its dark stained concrete juttings casting deep and ominous shadows over the dank little corners they create – as to be almost comical; though mostly it makes me angry. On the adjoining and equally hideous Queen Elizabeth Hall there is a violet sign against the streaked striated cement of the place; and a concrete spiral staircase has been crudely painted bright yellow: both look ridiculous, though clearly someone is striving vainly. The result is a well-meaning attempt by a teacher on a shoestring to dicky up a woeful nursery situated in a leaky and condemned underground garage. And so next to all of this Gormenghast horror, the Royal Festival Hall sings out as a masterpiece of delicacy and grace.

The interior is as large as a park. There's a long and rather swish bar, lots of well-spaced seating and a small and trendy shop, seemingly – and highly ironically – specialising exclusively in a celebration of all things British

from the 1930s and 1940s, memories of which the South Bank complex was designed to obliterate. And up a cantilevered staircase is Skylon: a vast and lofty space lit up brilliantly by the curtain window running the length of it – and it's here you really have to have your table.

Chandeliers

Admittedly on the rather grey day I was there, the vista of the gunmetal river is not too inspiring – but when the sun shines, or else in the evening when the embankment is strung with lights ... this would be really quite something. Décor is cool and Scandinavian – immense chandeliers fashioned from plywood and looking like millwheels, olive drab Robin Day chairs and toning carpet. Tumblers are amber – which makes your water look a bit like your water, but never mind.

My guest was Anna Nash, an extremely able, attractive and enthusiastic lady who for nine years has been head

of the global press and PR side of the very stylish Orient-Express group. "I do think this is the best restaurant around here," she says. "But I also like Oxo Tower". She knows quite a bit about fine dining, her job taking her to all sorts of very fabulous spots. The Orient-Express is about so much more than the fabled trains – they also own many of the best known hotels and restaurants in the world: the Splendido, Cipriani, Villa San Michele ... and that's just Italy. I won't even mention Reid's Palace in Portugal, Madrid's Ritz, the Copacabana Palace in Rio, and New York's '21': no, won't even trouble to mention those.

The menu is not large – six choices for starters and mains – but is full of intriguing and unusual things: two courses for £24.50, with an extra four quid for pud. These prices are not especially low, so it is annoying to see supplements – £3 for the crab starter or the duck main, £5 for cheese: none of that should be necessary.

"Interesting menu ..." Anna was musing, while sipping champagne. "Seared cuttlefish ... isn't that what budgies eat?". Having decided that that dish was strictly for the birds, she went instead for a terrine of confit free range chicken, ham hock and savory cabbage with sauce gribiche (a sort of mayonnaise). This was as beautiful as an abstract mosaic, and she evidently adored it. I had what was billed as 'white Cornish crab with cashews, coconut and a saffron-mace vinaigrette'. The nicely chopped cylinder was rather pinker from the inclusion of brown meat than 'white crab' should be – though the flavour was delicate; a surrounding ring of sauce as yellow as that aforementioned beastly spiral staircase gave it a special spike – the addition of a few broken cashews was rather unnecessary, while any coconut was undetectable.

For her main Anna was having salt marsh lamb rump and caramelised shoulder in a rose harissa jus (this involving hot red chillies). The shoulder was shredded and formed into a cylinder, over and around which the jus was poured. This came with 'autumn roots', while my main – pot au feu, a thing you don't see around much any more – had slightly more up-to-date 'winter roots': they were the same, of course. The beef was thick and lean,

FACT FILE

- **SKYLON**
Royal Festival Hall, Belvedere Road, SE1
Tel: 020-7654 7800
- Open Monday to Saturday noon-2.30pm, 5.30pm-10.30pm. Sunday noon-4pm.
- Food: ★★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★★☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★★☆☆
- Cost: Two courses £24.50, three courses £28.50. Wine available by glass. Bottles from reasonably reasonable to pricey-pricey.

thin strips of celery, carrot, leek and possibly turnips all present and correct, though the whole thing was curiously underpowered: it was good to eat, to be sure, but lacked an aromatic intensity which you expect from so long and slow-cooked a dish. Too much horseradish sauce covered the beef, this inevitably curdling in the poured-over consomme.

Flames

Anna's lamb, by contrast, was deeply flavoursome and rather gorgeously sticky: excellent. "I do love food," she said happily, wolfing it down. "Even when I'm having breakfast, I know exactly what I want for dinner". And she knew exactly what she wanted for pudding as well: crepe suzette. So along came the very affable head waiter with his box of tricks: into the pan went the butter, the orange, the crepe, the Grand Marnier ... and then whoosh!! He went up in flames and so did the whole of the Royal Festival Hall ...! Well, not quite – but gosh it was fiery for a moment. I had three Tolerone-shaped wedges of chocolate nougat – nicely chewy – with a superb and just-tart-enough cherry confit. And then came a silver wheel bearing tiny cubic marshmallows, jellies and truffles – the last of which Anna avoided. "I don't like posh choc – though I do have a thing about Cadbury's Mini Eggs". I just love her attitude to food.

And so – after all that levity – back out into the cold Thames-side drizzle of reality. I don't know ... maybe what all we Londoners need now is a fully fledged festival ...

■ 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.