

You need to know rules of the game at dim sum specialists Ping Pong

Going out for a Chinese turns out to be not so easy for **Joseph Connolly** as he's handed a score sheet, pencil and a menu filled with tick boxes

Fiona Bruce, she was there. In Ping Pong, when I went. You know – Fiona Bruce: BBC newsreader, Antiques Roadshow object of lust to gentlemen who can be even older than the things that are carted along for assessment. And let us not forget her erstwhile title of 'Rear of the Year', as bestowed last year by a committee which annually sits on their backsides about a table while rating both the pertness and pulchritude of famous women's bottoms. Look – it's modern life, and who will bat an eyelid? Anyway – she was there, Fiona Bruce. I only mention her, frankly, because I'm not really sure how much there is to say about this restaurant. It's dim sum.

You know dim sum: bits of Oriental this and that – or, as Ping Pong's very self-reverential though mercilessly larkily puts it: "little steamed parcels of deliciousness". They go on to tell you that "steam is the key element, but it also represents the fluid calm that is central to everything we do". Well there's a nugget for you: if not exactly food for thought, then certainly a little steamed parcel of deliciousness.

Handcrafted

But I have long ago decided that the people who write all this sort of guff must either be as high as a kite, or else are just having a laugh. Here's a little more – get this: "Everything is handcrafted by our dexterous [sic] chefs. We may have put a man on the moon, but there remains no better way to make dim sum!". What can one say? Well how about "Huh ...?". They're inordinately proud of their cocktails in this place, so I can only assume that the copywriters have been necking them down and laughing like drains.

The original Ping Pong opened in Soho, oh – must be eight or nine years ago now. Hugely feted at the time, when dim sum was something of a novelty in London, though now with a reputation for patchiness at best.

The Hampstead High Street branch is in the tall glass-fronted corner building that once was home to ZeNW3 – also pretty inconsistent, now I think of it. As are most of the more chi-chi Chinese places, in my experience. One's local takeaway is probably the best bet: it will always be reliably cheap and comfortably mediocre, while no one will mind if you dump fried seaweed on top of your chow mein and wolf the



■ Fretwork and brown walls greet Joseph at Ping Pong in Hampstead High Street, a spot once home to ZeNW3

Fiona Bruce was there ... Ten minutes in and it's totally bum-numbing and I couldn't help wondering how the Rear of the Year was coping

whole mess with a spoon.

So what do we have here? We have a pleasant little entrance lobby with primrose leather chairs, a potted bamboo and some agreeable Chinoiserie fretwork. Then we have a lofty light-filled space with dung-coloured walls (because you know how it is – you are confronted with the Dulux spectrum and you think, "I know, let's not play safe – let's be a little bit excremental!"). Then there's more fretwork and square black tables surrounded by smaller square black tables, though it turns out that these you

are supposed to sit on. Certainly a sound way of ensuring that the punters will never be tempted to loaf their way through an afternoon sipping non profit-making tea: ten minutes in, and it's totally bum-numbing. I couldn't help but wonder how the Rear of the Year was coping (but then its all-round gorgeousness is no doubt so much better suited to this sort of thing than my own so sad and pitiful rump).

Complicated menu

So my wife and I set to minding the menu: it's complicated, if you don't know the form. There is an explanatory folder of dozens of choices, and then you get a sort of score sheet and a pencil and you tick off as many little steamed parcels of deliciousness as you think you can cram down you. Most of the dumplings and so on are between £3 and £4 each, and the waiter recommended between three and five for each of us. So – deep breath: crispy seaweed nibbles, spicy seasoned prawn crackers, beef dumpling (billed as a 'special'), king prawn and garlic

black dumpling (a 'signature dish'), steamed fluffy white vegetable buns, king prawn and scallop sticky rice, roast pork puff and crispy hoi sin duck spring roll. Think that's all. You can also tick a box to say that you want to be out of the restaurant by a certain time because you have "more plans today!" – or that you are celebrating, so want to be made a fuss of. And here's another one: "Were thiiirsty! Please keep the drinks flowing!". Weird, eh? I thought it was weird.

So we chomped our way through savoury and good little crunchy seaweed biscuits and prawn crackers that were certainly a cut above the norm.

The roast pork puffs were the highlight – shredded pork in sweet and glazed puff pastry: rather delicious. Everything was served in threes, though – and when there are only two of you, there will be squabbles, mark my words. The beef dumpling was rather soggy: a something and a nothing.

The king prawn black dumpling was indeed dramatically black and rather flavoursome – still a bit claggy, though – and nearly all of the dipping sauces were red hot chilli, which just about annihilates everything else. The fluffy vegetable buns looked and smelled like miniature bales of washing fresh from the mangle, and so indeed they proved to be. The duck spring roll was as it always is, as was the sticky rice.

My wife had ordered tea of 'jasmine pearls'. This came as a pint glass of hot water

with what look like little dead molluscs clustered at its base. These quite gradually flowered into seemingly living molluscs, and the resultant drink was apparently wonderful. I'd nearly finished all the food, and got to wondering why I still was so hungry. I also got to wondering why they'd called this chain Ping Pong.

Not, I suppose, after Liz Hurley's Amazonian parrot of the same name (the things you learn here, eh?) but probably after the game, imagined by some to have been invented by the Chinese, though I can trace it only to the English drawing room of the 1880s where it was played on the dining table with books as bats and either a champagne cork or golf ball (there being no record of the scale of postprandial havoc that this must have caused). The aristocrats who played it called the game Wiff-Waff – no doubt a lisp reference to the element they sought to exclude.

Anyway ...earlier, when still very peckish, I had been about to order more food – but felt suddenly and rather queasily grateful that I had hesitated. I was bloated. I said to my wife "I'm bloated. Are you bloated?" She said "I am. I'm bloated". So there – we both staggered out, quite like a pair of bum-numb, bloated and steamed little parcels of deliciousness.

■ **JACK THE LAD AND BLOODY MARY** (Faber and Faber, £8.99) is a novel by Joseph Connolly. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

Small bites

■ The warm weather may have us craving ice-cream – but frozen yoghurt is a healthier, lower fat alternative.

Three years after opening its first store at Brent Cross, YOG leads the UK market



with its probiotic yoghurt desserts flavoured with chocolate or fruit juices and accompanied by a range of toppings from fresh fruit to almonds to chocolate-covered seeds. It's clearly catching on as sales are up 500 per cent at the Brent Cross outlet with the current top-selling flavour pomegranate.

The tangy, not-too-sweet iced treat earned an enthusiastic thumbs-up in the Ham&High office as did the delicious, if slightly sweeter, passion fruit, sprinkled with fresh blueberries and raspberries. Both tasted all the better because they contain no artificial flavours or preservatives, are made from skimmed milk from a Kent dairy farm and cost just £2.25 for a small pot which contains 110 calories. Visit www.yogyogurt.com for details.

■ Camden Town bar and restaurant The Blues Kitchen is running a week-long festival of – what else – blues music.

The Camden High Street venue serves traditional southern soul food, including ribs, gumbo and blackened shrimp, and an impressive array of American whiskies, bourbons and ryes.

Live music

There's also a stage for live music and, until Sunday there will be a stellar line-up of rhythm and blues talent, including Mud Morganfield, son of the legendary Muddy Waters, Mark Flanagan, who has played with Jools Holland, Paul Weller, Amy Winehouse and Eric Clapton, and US rockabilly outfit Jack Rabbit Slim. Bespoke cocktails inspired by the evening's line-up will be on offer including the "Mudslide", the "Split Hog" and the "Hillbilly Rock". The Blues Kitchen, 111-113 Camden High Street. 020-7387 5277. www.blueskitchen.com.

■ Around the corner in Delancey Street, the Caponata Caffe holds its official launch this weekend with live music, dancing and free samples. The event runs on Friday and Saturday, from noon, when foodies can sample the Italian restaurant's selection of seasonal summer salads, artisan breads, fresh pastas, hot soups, ice-cream and cakes. The Caffe will be open from 9am for breakfast, serving lunch from noon and dinner from 6pm.

In the evenings, the downstairs room becomes a bar with snacks, aperitivos and cocktails. 3-7 Delancey Street. 020-7387 5959. www.caponatacamden.co.uk.

FACT FILE

■ PING PONG

83-84 Hampstead High Street, NW3. Tel: 020-7433 0930

■ Open Mon-Fri noon-11pm. Sat 11am-11pm. Sun 11am-10.30pm

■ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆

The Feeling:

★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆ (more if it's full, I imagine)

■ Cost: Hard to say. Probably £40 for two without booze. More if you don't wait until you're bloated.