

Three men in a boat hoist up the sail to savour summer by the canal

Joseph Connolly finds everything shipshape at nautically themed spot

So I was in the Gents at The Wolseley, see – and who should I run slap bang into but Harold Tillman. Harold, who has lived in Highgate for the past thirty years, is the always immaculately turned out Chairman of the Fashion Council who also owns such great British institutions as Jaeger and Aquascutum; last year he was awarded the CBE for services to the industry. A very affable and effortlessly elegant fellow, he is a fixture at London's very best eating places as well as all the most exclusive launches and opening parties. What I didn't know about him, however, is that he is also in partnership with his son Mitchell, who owns about ten rather good and well known restaurants in London, among them the first rate Notting Hill Brasserie, the Ebury, Harry Morgan in St John's Wood and The Running Horse, a fabulous pub in Mayfair. And what he didn't know about me is that I review such things. Well – it all seemed rather pre-destined after that. I had suggested lunch before I knew any of this, and so it seemed rather silly really not to be visiting one of his own – and particularly as the very one I had in mind (The Summerhouse in Maida Vale, which has been on my list for simply ages) opens only during the summer months: April to October, to be precise. And so it came to pass that I found myself at a table in a restaurant with the joint proprietors: this is unprecedented – I just never do this. But you see how it was. The good news (phew!) is that the food, location and company were all enormously enjoyable, otherwise things could have got a teeny bit sticky – the reason, of course, why I always avoid this sort of thing in the first place.

Bunting and sailcloth

The Summerhouse is hard by the canal, and just moments away from Mitchell's primary restaurant in the area, The Waterway. Where I had been sitting like a damned fool for a good ten minutes before realising I was in the wrong bloody place altogether. So I beetled away – and there was The Summerhouse, just down the road: a long low building looking not unlike a boat, on a quiet and leafy street. The nautical feel is very much boosted the moment you walk through the door: the first impression is truly invigorating – and particularly so when the sun has not just got his hat on but is properly putting his back into it, as was the case this glorious afternoon. The space is made



Joining the crew ... Joseph Connolly with The Summerhouse's proprietors, fashion house owner Harold Tillman and his son Mitchell

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up of trussed and weathered beams, the tables pale to resemble driftwood. There is bunting, gaily striped sailcloth and a floor that looks like Brighton beach set into resin – which actually is pretty much what it is (the décor, as in all of Mitchell's restaurants, is down to his sister Meredith: there's a sort of Rocco Forte/ Olga Polizzi dynasty thing going on here). And then you see that the far wall isn't there – it's completely open to the gentle breeze, and beyond are the brightly coloured narrow boats languidly bobbing, lapped by the canal. On each table there is a bottle containing – no, not a ship, but a single zingy yellow gerbera.

"I really am after a holiday feel," says Mitchell. "This is why I close down completely

for the winter. If someone came here on a wet and freezing day, it would destroy all their memories of the place". Not, of course, that the English summer precludes such days – but you do see what he means. And this ideology is amplified in the menu, and particularly the drinks list: lots of happy and summery cocktails ... and I have never before seen a wine list offering eleven whites, eight roses, six champagnes and just two sorts of red. "Rose," says Mitchell, "is really the signature drink here. It looks so perfect, and everyone seems to prefer it". It's certainly Harold's favourite, when he's here, and the three of us were happily glugging our way through a beauty, filled with the fruit and sun of Provence.

Starters were brought pretty promptly by one of the young and smiling waiters (there are also young and smiling waitresses – if it's young and smiley you're into, then you're in for a field day). Tillman pere made fairly short work of a temptingly translucent tuna carpaccio, while both Tillman fils and myself found it impossible to resist the prawn and avocado cocktail: some people scoff at this retro dish – I myself prefer simply to scoff it. This

was a particularly good example: a conical glass bowl rammed with fresh and plump prawns and creamy avocado, these merely bound together by just enough stirred in Marie Rose sauce with a hint of paprika: none of the great gloopy spoonful – and the lettuce was putting in simply a token appearance, by way of a garnish. Also on the table was a vast wooden bowl of crudites, all of which were a Technicolor and crunchy delight: whole peeled carrots, celery, cauliflower florets, quartered red and yellow peppers, sweetcorn and fabulous radishes the size of a plum.

Fish pie

The Summerhouse Fish Pie sounded alluring: salmon, smoked haddock, cod and prawns, it said. It was attractively presented in a white ceramic trough, the mashed potato in shell-like curls. It was pretty good – nice and moist (because if it ain't a bit gooey, it's no good at all) but too heavy on the salmon, with very little white fish to speak of: prawns were there none. Harold's rather huge beer battered haddock looked just the job – a proper golden crust, within which the fish had steamed. Big chips in a small porcelain bucket, and the mushy peas were suitably luminous. Mitchell's fish cake also looked to be the real deal – well bread-crumbed, and with a thick yellow chive and butter sauce looking very much like an hollandaise. Spinach and tomato chutney chipped in with a bit of colour.

Sprinkled amid Harold's many successes in the clothing industry, there have always been ventures into bars and restaurants. He opened,

among others, the Bar Royale on the corner of Delancey Street in Camden Town (now The Blues Kitchen) and later the hugely fashionable Rumours in Covent Garden. Mitchell clearly has inherited the ethic: during his university holidays he was working his way up from the bottom at The Dorchester (the bottom, in this world, believe me, being a very horrible place to be). Just a few months ago he acquired the legendary World's End pub in Chelsea which he has restored and themed to the golden days of Hollywood. "And we've got a roof terrace, so I've made a sort of mini Summerhouse up there. There's no water, of course ...". Well no, the King's Road isn't really that big on canals.

I think I must have been openly slaving over Mitchell's banoffee crepes, because he offered me a taster: truly excellent – light and thin pancake, rich banana and seriously good chocolatey dribblings. I had a very refreshing Pimm's jelly – firm and Pimmsy – with fine vanilla ice cream. I really do urge you to get down to this place, you know – because rather like the asparagus season, you have to grab it while it's here: the perfect spot for a sunny summer lunch, or a leisurely dinner on a balmy evening. Yes ... and so I was in the Gents at The Summerhouse, see – and who should I run slap bang into but nobody whatsoever. Some you win, some you lose.

THIS IS IT (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.

Pub review with Ben Bloom



The Lord's Tavern

Lord's spot back on ball with return to British roots

As a cricket fan – OK, a cricket obsessive – the thought of any sort of trip to Lord's is exciting. Many a long day has been spent in baking sunshine or rain fall, while lapping up the grandeur of the Home of Cricket. But when it came to the Lord's Tavern, even I had my doubts. Dating back to 1868, the Tavern began life as a hostelry on the other side of the ground before the move to its present location on St John's Wood Road in 1967. In recent years, the place had gained something of a bad reputation. Charging high prices, the Tavern had drifted into faux fine dining territory and it wasn't working.

So earlier this year, Marylebone Cricket Club, which owns Lord's, decided to start again and make it more appealing to the community – hence its present incarnation of upmarket pub and restaurant.

Decorated with old-style wallpaper and with the original Lord's Tavern sign inside, the refurbished venue attempts to restore a link to its heritage. With simple, comfortable furniture throughout, it retains a relaxing feel although there is something of a battle between the smaller restaurant area, which was full on the night we visited, and the larger pub section, which wasn't.

One glance at the menu makes the style of food abundantly clear – fish and chips, bangers and mash, ploughman's, bread and butter pudding... hearty British food back to the Tavern's roots. I went for the chicken liver (£4) to start, beer battered haddock and hand-cut chunky chips (£9.50) for main and sticky toffee pudding (£4.50) for dessert. Served on beautiful wooden plates, the food was cleverly presented and there can be no qualms about the delicious taste. Perfect fare for an upmarket tavern.

Ticking all the right boxes in terms of food and ambience, the Lord's Tavern is successfully on track to turn around its damaged reputation – now it just needs the locals to return.

Bookings on 0207 6168687.

FACT FILE

- **THE SUMMERHOUSE**
Opposite 60 Blomfield Road, W9. Tel: 020-7266 3557
- Open Mon-Fri noon-11pm, Sat 10.30am-11pm, Sun 11am-10.30pm. April-October only.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- Cost: About £80 for a three course meal for two, with wine.