

## Food&Drink

# Despite a knowledgeable guide, Joseph Connolly is overpowered in Drummond Street North London's little India too hot to handle

North London's closest approach to downtown Delhi has to be Drummond Street, just off the Hampstead Road. I only ever knew it in the past from Lawrence Corner, that dank and cavernous army surplus store of legend that now is a very ugly, bright green and weird-looking pharmacy. I had gone to Lawrence Corner in the late 1960s expecting to be transformed into Sergeant Pepper in exchange for eighteen shillings and ninepence – all the money I had on earth. It turned out that all this would run to was a wormy mosquito net and a battered olive-coloured tin that once had contained anti-malarial tablets. Glamour – then as ever – cost money. So I decided instead to settle for growing a moustache closely modelled upon that sported at the time by Paul McCartney, but after months of strain and willing it to be, my upper lip was stubbornly holding out at just seven hairs on the one side, and only four on the bloody other. It's filled out since.

Nowadays, Drummond Street is home to no fewer than twelve Indian restaurants as well as several shops specialising in Indian sweets and cakes and biscuits and spices. There is also an English pub and an African eating place – both of them shuffling their feet and clearing their throats very self-consciously indeed. I don't actually much care for Indian food, so God knows really what I was even doing here. Well I do know, actually – I was here to have dinner with my chum the author and journalist Geoffrey Wansell, who had told me that he rather favours Indian food, so I thought he might be able to give me a few pointers. Some way into the meal, however, I learned that he is utterly devoid of any sense of smell, and it's only Indian food that has a hope of even partially getting through. Right, I said ... I see ...

Most of the restaurants here are outwardly much of a muchness, but Zeen looks to be rather zingy. A large orange box-shaped and lit-up canopy invites you down a flight of opaque glass stairs uplit in orange, whereupon the basement restaurant is laid before you: orange acrylic cubic pendants – and on every table a similar sort of orange thing in miniature. Orange leather chairs and banquettes ... you know, if you're not too keen on orange, I'd frankly give the place a miss. A party of five small and chattering Asian ladies left as



■ Joseph with his dinner guest, the author and journalist Geoffrey Wansell

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I entered, whereupon a further party of seven small and chattering Asian ladies promptly entered: I was hoping that I hadn't somehow strayed into a members' club exclusive to small and chattering Asian ladies, each of whose future was orange.

Geoffrey writes for the Daily Mail, among other papers, and is frequently to be heard voicing his forthright and amusing opinions on Radio 2's Jeremy Vine programme. "They wheel me on as their old fart," he says, quite roguishly.

He is also the author of books about people as diverse as Cary Grant, Terence Rattigan ... and

Fred West. Yes: the multiple killer. Why would he wish to immerse himself in so terrible a world, I asked him. "Well – I have always been fascinated by the minds of criminals". So much so that this week he publishes a new book called The Bus Stop Killer about the psychopath Levi Bellfield, recently convicted of the murder of the schoolgirl Milly Dowler.

So what are we going to eat? The menu is arranged fairly helpfully as Appetizers, Mains and Chef's Specials, with an equally large range available for vegetarians, which is rare.

The dishes span pretty much every region of Indian cuisine,

and Geoffrey was drawn to the unusual: a fish chilli fry (bearing the 'hot' symbol) followed by Konkani crab, this in fresh coconut, cardamom and coriander seed. I meanwhile was at pains to avoid the 'hot' symbol like the very plague: as soon as my palate is coated with The Tingle, I can taste nothing else, and I completely lose interest. So, something mild: lamb pattice – billed as potato cutlets (potato cutlets? Really?) stuffed with freshly spiced ground lamb – and then Goan chicken cafreal: a roasted breast in a mint and coconut marinade. A side of lasooni bainga aubergine to share, and meanwhile we

were crunching good poppadoms.

The 'cutlets' turned out to be what looked like two fishcakes – rather leaden mash rammed with granules of lamb that coated my palate with The Tingle so that I could taste nothing else, and I completely lost interest. Geoffrey's unspecified fried fish pieces were "at first delicate, quite well done," he said, but then "very, very hot – too hot. And I like hot".

After we had eaten as much of our starters as we were going to, he added insouciantly "Of course the thing about Indian restaurants is never to have a starter". Right, I said ... I see ...

### Star of the show

My chicken breast was overcooked, though not notably roasted, the vivid green 'marinade' (more a poured-over sauce, I should have said) had detectable fresh mint, maybe coriander ... but all really was lost to The Tingle. The fluffy rice was fluffy: what can I say? The aubergine was surprisingly good and creamy and actually the star of the show, which is not what you want nor expect of a side dish. Geoffrey's crab came as a great big mound of gooey brownness, surmounted by the shell. Along with the crab pick, the waitress had brought a bowl of water and two white tablets – dead ringers for Alka Seltzer, which was hardly encouraging. "Are they maybe earplugs ...?" Geoffrey wondered, fingering them. I was hoping he didn't try to find out: what with his lack of smell and then induced deafness (allied to my loss of taste) all it would have taken is for him to have removed his glasses for us both to have been rendered collectively senseless.

The gooey brownness he pronounced to be sort of okay ... but then he became exhausted by the sheer effort of attempting to extract tiny fragments of crab from the claws and other more unpromising bits. "There's probably some more there, but I'm really not moved to work so hard to find it".

The waitress then explained the tablets: you drop them into the water, and they expand into little flannels for the fingers. "People have eaten them in the past," she said. Geoffrey nodded in sympathy. He still was hungry, you could tell: I rather suspect he could have murdered a curry.

■ All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website [www.josephconnolly.co.uk](http://www.josephconnolly.co.uk).

### FACT FILE

- **ZEEN**
- 130 Drummond Street, NW1 Tel: 020-7387 0606
- Open for lunch Monday to Saturday noon-3pm, dinner Monday to Friday 5.30pm-11.30pm. Saturday 6pm-11.30pm. Closed Sunday.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆ (if you like décor which reminds you of the old Golden Egg, which I do)
- Cost: £35-40 for a two course meal for two, without wine (because wine can't cope with The Tingle).

### Pub round with Bridget Galton

## Bar menu at the Wells Tavern proves just the ticket for rain-sodden Kenwood-goers

Clutching sodden tickets to the Kenwood Proms, I washed up as a refugee from the rain at the Wells Tavern last month.

Stowing the uneaten picnic in the boot of the car – along with a pair of Primark pants and a Travelodge room key I was hoping to chuck at Tom Jones – we stumbled into the steamy,

packed downstairs bar and scored the last available table near the semi-open kitchen.

Andy Murray was on telly beating his opponent and adorning the walls was a rogues gallery of Hampstead faces – including our very own Well Walk cartoonist Ken Pyne.

There was a pleasant ear-

ly evening ambience, families with young children enjoying a meal and locals winding down with a beer and a snack at the end of a working week.

We shared a ham hock terrine with terrific homemade Piccalilli. Although himself indoors announced there was no place for cauliflower in a pickle, the vine-

gary, mustardy relish nicely offset the porkiness of the pate.

### Juicy burgers

We both plumped for burgers, which come in a shade under a tenner but can be enhanced with cheese or bacon. They were exemplary. Juicy, beefy, soft bun, and accompanied by homemade

creamy coleslaw. The only bum note, frozen rather than hand-made chips.

Dessert was the most unctuous, moreish chocolate pot that anyone with a late pregnancy chocolate craving could hope for.

The other half enjoyed a couple of pints of locally brewed lager and, with a small glass of wine and

service, a nigh-on faultless three courses came in at just under £50.

There's fancier dining to be had upstairs but the short, well-executed bar menu certainly delivers on taste and quality.

■ Bookings on 020-7794 3785. Visit [www.thewells-hampstead.co.uk](http://www.thewells-hampstead.co.uk).