

Food&Drink

When Joseph Connolly met Mavis Cheek, it was all bound to turn out just a bit weird

Once again, it's a tale of the unexpected for these author pals

The whole point of meeting the novelist Mavis Cheek in a restaurant in Maida Vale was that it's two minutes from Paddington, see – and it was at Paddington Station that she was due to arrive at 12.50pm from Hungerford. She used to be a Chiswick girl, Mavis, but decamped to Wiltshire quite a few years ago, where she lives in blissful and bucolic isolation, while being regularly feted as a local celebrity. “Last week I judged the dog show,” she told me. “I hate dogs. Don't know a damn thing about them – but all I had to do was award prizes to the waggiest tail, the perkier ears – oh, and the best hat. This was won jointly by two little pups called Eugenie and Beatrice. I am looking forward to next year's event when they promise I can judge the best bitch.”

Waspish, eh? But that's Mavis – a very witty woman, both in person and in print. We used to have a common publisher (in that they published us both, not in the sense that they were all a

pack of jobs) and her fifteenth novel, *The Lovers of Pound Hill*, came out in May. But let's get back to our meeting: the idea was lunch at one in the Formosa Dining Room (nothing to do with oriental – it's in Formosa Street). I was early so I sloped off to Clifton Nurseries just around the corner to fill in some time. Two things happened there – a monsoon descended from a blackened sky, and Mavis rang me: “I'm going to be late. Don't ask. It's all a nightmare”. “Right-o,” I responded merrily – “I'll just continue to hang around the nursery”. So I did that, and then I got thoroughly wet spattering off to the restaurant. No Mavis yet, so I had a look around me. It's a pleasant skylit room with ironwork roof trusses, an old oak floor, chunky dark furniture and brown ribbed velvet chairs and banquettes.

The walls are covered in a sepia mural depicting a vista of Little Venice. At the next table were four loud men from the building trade who kept saying things like foyve grand, noyne grand, twenny grand... asked why he had erroneously imported some type of flooring, the most voluble of them said “I fought viss were ve fing”.

The dining room adjoins the Prince Alfred, a Young's house which has probably the most amazing and unspoilt pub interior I have ever seen: glorious fluted columns, panelling, high Victorian clocks, cornices, pediments, encaustic and ceramic tiles, acid etched glass mirrors and windows: the exterior is equally sublime.

Mavis then arrived, look-

ing lovely in white on so very unsummery a day. What had happened was this: she drove from her home to Hungerford station... and there was nowhere to park, so she drives to London, parks in Hammersmith and then goes nuts in the rain waiting for a taxi.

I wasn't too surprised: over the years, she and I have done many literary festivals and so on together, and something weird always seems to happen. Cars don't arrive, hotel bookings and venues are switched without warning – once, she had her credit cards stolen. And her keys. Another time we stood outside the theatre in which we were meant to be performing in the midst of hailstones because they'd locked all the doors. The craziest of all was when we were booked into a hotel in Durham that had no bar! I mean to say: two authors – please! So we got wine from Threshers, a corkscrew from Woolworths, and set up our own.

Food sculpture

There is a two course lunch at £11.50 – three for £4 more – as well as a la carte, and that's the way we went. Mavis was having home cured salmon, beetroot fondant, orange chicory and ginger



■ A very strange day out at the Formosa Dining Room for Joseph Connolly and Mavis Cheek

crème fraîche, while my starter was to be asparagus and brie in Parma ham with leaves and a balsamic reduction. While she ate the sausage of rolled up salmon balanced upon a perfect cube of beetroot, she wanted to know why I hadn't been arrested for hanging around a nursery. “It was plants, Mavis,” I patiently explained. “Not kiddies – plants, my dear. And how is your starter ...?” “Unremarkable – it looks good. Like a Sarah Lucas sculpture. Talking of which, my daughter was trying to persuade me to go to the Tracey Emin exhibition. No, I said: you don't have to be sat on by an elephant to know it will hurt”. My gooey brie in ham was rather good (it tasted like a toastie) though the asparagus was of the white and narrow gauge variety and had been charred to the consistency of straw.

Mavis was impressed by her main course: chicken

ballotine – with brie again – also sun dried tomato, baby artichoke, crispy polenta cake and lemon dressing.

The chicken (I tasted it) was gorgeously tender and flavoursome, the polenta a fine-looking golden cylinder (but polenta is polenta). She thought the dressing fresh and good, “but it all could have done with a bit of bite – maybe just a twist of pepper.”

I had a more Desperate Dan sort of a thing: steak and ale pie with mash and seasonal vegetables. “Is it home made?” I asked. “No,” said the waitress, “but it's very good”. Well it wasn't, really. It looked the part – fine crimped and sunburnt crust – but the pastry at the sides was pale and uncooked.

The steak had a reasonably decent flavour, though it was chewy, but the binding gravy-gloop was very good indeed. Mash and mangetout were fine. And we were drinking a nicely fruity merlot cabernet Vin de Pays at only £17.85, though the accompanying jug of water tasted of Little Venice.

As Mavis's pudding was served, the mandatory weird thing came along: a waiter was at my side with a fine half bottle of Sauternes (Chateau Filhot 2003) and checking that I was Mr Connolly.

Guilty as charged. It appeared that there was a Frenchman in the adjoining Prince Alfred who liked these Ham&High reviews I do, and here was a gift.

He turned out to be a Robert Downey Jnr lookalike called Jean-Claude who was amusing and very knowledgeable about food and wine but, being French, quite often unintelligible.

Mavis and I hoped that we beamed, nodded and wagged our heads in all the right order. He was very entertaining though, and the wine quite luscious. Which made up for Mavis's pudding, which should never have left the kitchen. It was billed as custard tart with summer berry coulis and cream – but in the tiny tart: no custard, apart from a very few rather horridly curdled granules.

An attempt at disguise had been made with a huge and curly whoosh of whipped cream: they could have stuck a Flake in it. Oh well.

One day, maybe, Mavis and I will meet and everything will go seamlessly according to the prearranged plan. I do hope not, though.

■ *The Lovers of Pound Hill* by Mavis Cheek is published by Hutchinson. All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

FACT FILE

- **FORMOSA DINING ROOM**
5a Formosa Street, W9
Tel: 020-7286 3287
- Open Monday to Thursday noon-11pm. Friday to Saturday noon-9pm, Sunday noon-10pm
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆
- Cost: Two course set lunch £11.50, three courses £15.50. Otherwise about £80 for three course meal for two with wine.

Food bites with Tara Brady

Maida Vale's Jacqui B brings her designer touch to bistro life

Chic new bistro Formosina is all about mixing good food and art in a stylish and modern setting.

The Maida Vale establishment is the brainchild of Dutch-born interior designer and art collector Jacqui Brantjes, who is probably better known for her shop, Jacqui B, just a stone's throw away from her new flagship café.

She set about opening the eatery after completing the restoration of her Maida Vale home, which once belonged to ballerina Margot Fonteyn.

Chandeliers hang from the ceiling and large tables, deliberately

seating eight to ten, encourage communal dining.

Everyone welcome

Jacqui has tried to create a place that welcomes everyone – from busy workers on their lunch break and friends catching up to stressed-out mothers, who all can take refuge over a glass of fresh juice, a coffee or maybe a cheeky Bellini, while mulling over some urban art.

I opted for the simple, yet deliciously creamy asparagus soup, presented in a beautifully crafted bowl, which proved to be light and

refreshing yet really flavoursome.

For mains, a perfectly sized portion of al dente mushroom risotto was satisfyingly filling washed down with a glass of Prosecco.

But it doesn't stop there.

Adorning the walls are iconic pieces of work by artists such as Maximilian Wiedemann, all available to buy.

Even the furniture, including Baroque-style dining chairs, can be bought in the bistro which also has its own brand of olive oils and balsamic vinegar.

The restaurant is just a taster for what is to follow nationwide

and, eventually, globally with more planned for Paris, Rome and New York.

The fact that you can turn up for a coffee and leave with a unique piece of artwork under your arm surely makes this the ultimate takeaway.

■ Formosina is open throughout August for breakfast and lunch and will open from September 1 for dinner in the evening every day. The restaurant is now taking bookings for September. Bookings on 020-7289 9888. Formosina has no affiliation with the Formosa Dining Rooms.



■ Formosina is stylish and modern