

Lured in by Crouch End's many attractions

Joseph Connolly decides its high time for a visit to the market town-like north London enclave – only he'll be steering away from any mention of the waitresses

During the course of a recent review, I referred to a pair of female waitresses as being both blonde and beautiful. You will not however have read this, because the features editor snipped out the adjectives on the grounds that their retention might make me sound a bit of a pervert. A logic I hardly understand. Had I made constant and lascivious reference to the sexual allure of a slumbering mongrel, then conceivably the features editor might well have had a point. I do not consider, however, the observation of bloneness and beauty to be in itself so very terribly perverted – and nor do I believe that said two waitresses would have rushed to sue me. I say all this in order to explain why I am not now going to describe the waitress in St James at Crouch End as bright-eyed and attractive because if I do, you see ... well then this entire opening paragraph will be snipped by the features editor, and then you won't be able to read it.

Crouch End – despite it sounding like a tumbledown

mansion of Mervyn Peake's imagining, or else maybe a debilitating bout of piles – has long been overdue for a visit, and I must say I did enjoy it. The streets that converge on the Clock Tower are bursting with useful and intriguing shops, including a proper wet fishmonger, a butcher, and more bakers and teashops than you could decently shake a baguette at. The whole place is very much like a small provincial market town of thirty or more years ago – and that, believe me, is a rather wonderful and treasurable thing.

Popular place

St James had come recommended, and is a justifiably popular place whose modest frontage belies a rather vast interior. At the front is a sophisticated bar and casual eating area with dark wood-veneer floor, sage leather banquettes and bar stools, and brown leather chairs. Rather weirdly, the radio is on constantly, filling you in on all the latest wars – though on the plus side there are early black-and-white photographs of The Beatles, here being the mark of an enlightened proprietor. To the rear is a very smart and spacious restaurant with mirrored walls, and further beyond that a tiny terrace with square white marble tables and Philippe Starck plastic chairs – and that's where I plumped to have lunch. My guest is, of course, internationally famous for having produced and arranged all of the aforementioned Beatles records in the legendary Abbey Road studio, and ... oh hang on: that's George Martin, isn't it? No no – sor-



■ Joseph with Ham&High editor Geoff Martin at St James

ry, wrong person altogether: my guest was Geoff Martin, who is in charge of something called 'Ham&High' – not actually anything to do with condemned pork, but in fact a local newspaper. Geoff is recently back from a charity trek in Peru, and at some point in the Andes he realised four things: he had not heard a human voice in more than two hours, he had about his person but a cheese sandwich, the light was beginning to fade, and he had not the slightest idea where he was. "My God!" I cried. "Where were you lost ...?!" "Well," said Geoff, "I don't know where I was lost, Joseph. That's the whole point, you see." The good news is he survived. Well obviously.

So he went for roast apple with melted blue cheese and crispy aubergine with a carrot and celery salad and walnut dressing (something ap-

proaching a Waldorf, then). This was attractively presented, the gooey cheese within the cored and nicely softened apple, the aubergine forming the thinnest crisps above it. At first he thought the cheese – probably Stilton – a mite over-strong, but then decided that the blend was perfect, and scoffed the lot. My starter was a prawn, langoustine and avocado cocktail, and something of a winner: a deep square bowl crammed with both small Atlantic prawns and the meatier langoustine, with soft pieces of avocado and a well-judged Marie Rose sauce (i.e. the paprika didn't take the roof of my mouth off).

Then the Ed was having roast cod, with what the menu insisted were 'work' vegetables. These as opposed to 'leisure' vegetables ...? No, just a misprint for 'wok', in a menu deliriously strewn with such highly amusing er-

rors, my favourite being the champagne by the name of "Verve Clique". The very good and flaky cod came with – get this – strawberry cream sauce. So ... how is it, Geoff? "Surprisingly good ... but raspberry would have been even better: less sweet." I would have gone for grilled rack of pork – something you rarely see – but I didn't fancy either of the accompaniments: butternut squash and horseradish mash. So I had roast rump of lamb – succulent and juicy with just the right hit of mint, in an excellent glossy jus. The dauphinois potatoes were dryish and slightly caught, but just about okay – the French beans fresh and suitably crunchy. We glugged the very gluggable house red – a Montepulciano, at only £15.95.

We both agreed that it would be piggish to follow all this with a pudding – so Geoff ordered Eton Mess (this

no doubt recalling to him the days when he was launch editor of the Windsor and Eton Observer) and he scooped it up with evident relish. I went for what was highlighted as the 'St James Speciality': Tollerone cheesecake with fruit compote and a strawberry reduction. Yes well ... here was a pale brown, squishy and rather sickly wedge, and I failed to detect even a smidgen of the almond and honey that combine within the mouth-filling and chocco lusciousness of a true Tollerone (a chunk of which, incidentally, may be described only as 'Tollerone-shaped', because there is no other term in the English language). The compote was very nice indeed, and just sharp enough... though the rather fudgy 'St James Speciality' was, I'm afraid, quietly abandoned. Geoff then told me about his enthusiasm for golf. For some reason. Anyway, last week he was playing for four days with his son in Donegal – an annual and hotly contested fixture – and often he plays nine holes at Hampstead. "At its highest point, it's just wonderful – the whole of London lies before you. You swear you could just reach out with a five-iron and touch the Post Office Tower."

St James is a very good local restaurant with friendly and efficient staff – and on emerging, I spotted several more potentials for future reviews. There is Bouga, a Turkish nightspot I have thought of going to before ... a steak restaurant called Monkeynuts ... and also a Vietnamese place, but this I shan't actually mention because if I tell you it's called Fresh Roll Honeymoon Crouch End, this might make me sound a bit of a pervert.

■ All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

FACT FILE

- **ST JAMES**
- 4 Topsfield Parade, Middle Lane, N8
- Tel: 020-8348 8348 (how cool!)
- Open Monday to Sunday 10am-10.30pm
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆
- Cost: Two course set lunch £9.95, two course set dinner £15.95. Otherwise about £75 for a three course meal for two, with wine.

Food bites

Children get a good start to the day with breakfast – thanks to a charity and a bakery

Gail's, the local bakery, has teamed up with charity Magic Breakfast to help them deliver breakfast to more schoolchildren every morning.

The charity, founded by Kentish Town resident Carmel McConnell, provides 6,000 breakfasts a day to youngsters from low income backgrounds who don't get the breakfast they need to get them through their morning lessons.

Seven hundred thousand children are hungry or malnourished at the start of the school day in the UK.

Magic Breakfast aims to change that by teaming up with food providers to deliver food to schools.

The charity also works in Camden schools, providing breakfasts and recently running a baking masterclass with artisan bread company Gail's.

In 2009, researchers from Imperial College, London found that the reward centres

of the brain respond greatly to high-calorie, fatty foods at lunchtime in study participants who skipped breakfast. The brains of people who ate breakfast were far less likely to be enticed by fatty foods. With this in mind, here are some top tips for breakfast from Magic Breakfast and Gail's Bakery.

Top tips

1. Make it into a family routine – just 10 minutes at the table with mum too makes breakfast a really good way to plan the day ahead and say hello. Whatever your morning routine, remember that breakfast is an important meal for the family and it doesn't have to be time consuming.
2. Choose a filling breakfast – porridge or protein such as peanut butter or cheese on toast. Wholemeal toast keeps your child full for longer as well.
3. Don't over sugar – that sugar rush is not going to do your child any good in school.



■ The St John's Wood branch of Gail's Bakery

Use honey instead of sugar and put fruit on the table as a cereal or toast topping. Sliced banana or raisins or blueberries are wonderful for a fast and filling breakfast.

4. Choose food with your children – children love pancakes but it might seem too

much everyday. But healthy pancakes with fruit can be a great start, a treat too. Here is the easy way. Make a batch of porridge oat, egg and honey pancakes, cook and freeze them at the weekend, wrap in daily servings and you can make a 10-minute pancake breakfast every morning.

5. Make a breakfast plan the night before – figure out what's for breakfast as you clear away the dinner the night before. Put out a breakfast tray with the bread, toppings, cereal, fruit, bowls and spoons. If your child won't eat breakfast at home, pack a banana and peanut butter sandwich to eat on the way to school.

■ Magic Breakfast can feed a hungry UK school child every school day for a year for just £42. See www.magicbreakfast.com/just-giving. Magic Breakfast will have a stall at Gail's Garden Party on Saturday September 10.