

Restaurant review

It's Hampstead's turn to head to the Côte

After proving a hit in Highgate, The Ivy's Richard Caring has opened up another north London branch of his French brasseries. Joseph Connolly heads out with the writer and illustrator John Burningham to see if the food and service matches up

Just three months ago I reviewed here a rather silly restaurant in Hampstead High Street called Ping Pong (dumplings that bloat you, bum-numbing stools) and now, from the same impressive corner and light-filled site there arises like an extremely hip and laid back Phoenix a very welcome and overdue outpost of Richard Caring's Côte empire. Because Côte is a useful concept – classy brasseries that will work for a dinner date, but still you can pop in to for a solitary brunch or else an extensive Sunday lunch with all the family, including pernickety Gran and the bloody noisy kids. Caring, of course, is the owner of such milestone London restaurants as The Ivy, J. Sheekey, Daphne's, Le Caprice ... oh, everything really – and in Côte we have echoes of the trademark décor along with food to rival most of them, with the bonus of a rather less damaging bill. A year ago I reviewed

the Highgate branch and predicted that in restaurant-starved N6, here would be quite a hit. So it has proved – and although this latest incarnation might well put quite a few well-established NW3 noses out of joint, I foresee exactly the same success in Hampstead.

I was there for lunch on the day it opened – the Monday of last week, a perfectly traditional English August Bank Holiday (depressingly dark and drizzly) – and the joint was fairly hopping. A good deal of day tripping families – not too heavy on locals, I think. Except at my table: upstairs in this cool, monochrome space with dark walnut accents and large light-reflecting beveled mirrors, my guest was the much-praised award-winning children's writer and illustrator extraordinaire, John Burningham. For more than fifty years he has lived in Hampstead with his much-praised award-winning children's writer and illustrator wife – Helen Oxenbury. Between them they must have chalked up a hundred books – including treasured classics such as John's Mr Gumpy's Outing and Granpa. To date he has sold four million books worldwide, his strongest markets being Japan and Korea; I expect there could be some sort of wildly inappropriate joke about this snippet of data, but I'm damned if I'm the man to make it.

In addition to the Hampstead house, John also has a place in France – and at this time of year that is where he would tend to be, but he has



■ Joseph with John Burningham at Côte in Hampstead High Street

been busily preparing for not one but two upcoming London exhibitions – one a retrospective at The Fleming Collection, a handsome gallery in Berkeley Street owned by the Fleming family of banking and 007 fame – rather fitting, as John was the original illustrator of Ian Fleming's trilogy Chitty-Chitty-Bang-Bang. The other show is at the London Transport Museum in Covent Garden.

Classic menu

But now to grub: John is no cook, he tells me: "I'm hopeless. I never think of it till I'm hungry, and then I open a tin'. But he is very enthusiastic and knowledgeable about food and wine – which is all you need in a lunch guest, really. The menu is extensive: classic French brasserie – so much so that I decided to pursue an absolutely classic route: moules marinière and steak

frites Bearnaise: are they up to doing the ordinary, extraordinarily well ...? John was going for breadcrumbed calamari rings with lemon and parsley and a tartare sauce, then pan roasted duck breast with gratin potato and a griottine cherry sauce. This turned out to be rather a delicate take on the hearty Hungarian staple: here were perfectly pink and tender prettily fanned out slices with a good and creamy dauphinois, the cherry just tart enough. "It is hard to find duck like that," he said. "It's excellent." He had been equally praising of his calamari, which came crunchily coated and served in a frying pan, the tartare alongside. "Very good indeed. No hint of rubber, which is what you always dread". He thought that the sad lack of even one single flower on the table was more than made up for by the large and proper

white linen napkins. "In France, you'll often get things that look like Moroccan knickers." I don't think I've ever seen napkins that look like Moroccan knickers, so I asked him how he knew that that was how Moroccan knickers looked. He said it was a guess.

My moules were good and nuggety, the sauce so fine that it would have passed muster as a damn good creamy soup. The steak was a properly aged piece of sirloin – though cooked rather more than the medium rare requested – with good and golden frites in a paper-lined trompette ... and the Bearnaise was sensational. I had actually been rather miffed that they were charging £1.95 extra for it – but I'm very particular about Bearnaise, and by God, this was truly the real thing. A side of French beans was also exemplary. So then (in addition to the complementary

filtered water in a chic little stoneware bottle) we sipped a Fleurie – pricey at £27.50 – which contained, according to the list, 'several punnets worth of soft red berry fruit' – which was true enough on the nose and in the mouth, but the swallow, I have to say, was rather less red berry than gooseberry. And we talked of the happy politeness and easy efficiency of Grace, our gap year waitress who had been bussed in from the Highgate branch for the opening. "I like working up there because I live very near and I can just roll out of bed and into Côte". Sweet: from bed to Côte, in just a single somnolent tumble. We were further electrified by the presence at the opposite table of Baron Samedi, the terrifying Haitian voodoo master as last seen (a bit more Ian Fleming) in Live And Let Die. Yes! Here he was in Hampstead, the witch doctor: ebony skin, rolling eyes, near naked to the waist and wearing a black top hat with a purple ostrich plume: I am not kidding. He would have struck a fearsome note, but for the fact that the inflexion in his voice was that of Graham Norton.

Sublime

I continued my classic path with a crème brûlée that was, for once, unadulterated, and completely perfect. John had ordered a coupe noir – vanilla ice cream with warm chocolate sauce – but in error they delivered a chocolate fondant. So they quickly followed up with a coupe noir ... and left us the buckshee fondant! Which was gooiily sublime. So ... Côte: a hit, a palpable hit. And here's the recipe for success: make sure that the meat is tender, the service loving, and the owner Caring.

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

FACTFILE

- CÔTE BRASSERIE
- 83-84 Hampstead High Street, NW3
- Tel: 020-7435 2558
- Open Monday to Friday 8am-11pm. Saturday 9am-11pm. Sunday 9am-10.30pm
- Food: ★★★★★☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆
- Cost: Lunch and early evening set two courses £9.95, three courses £11.90. Otherwise about £80 for a three-course meal for two with wine.

Lifestyle Rhiannon Edwards

Affordable wedding dresses you will be able to say I do to

If you're looking for a wedding gown and have a severe case of dress stress – September 18 may just be your lucky day.

The first Chic Eco wedding dress sale is taking place and a heap of loved-for-a-day gowns will be on offer.

Miranda Levey, 35, of East Finchley set up Chic Eco when she was looking to sell her wedding dress.

"There were no non-online places to sell a dress," she explains. "I think it is so important that you see the dress in real life before you buy it for your wedding."

Unimpressed by the hordes of

eBay transactions, Levey decided to put on her own sale. An appeal for dresses was fruitful – Levey will have 30 dresses for brides-to-be to consider.

Prices will range from £250 to a £3,500 Oscar de la Renta dress, originally £10,000. Sizes are from six to 22, with most being eight, 10 and 12.

'Good as new'

The money for the dresses will go to the original owners with Levey taking a small commission for her work as sale coordinator.

"I was 34 when I got married and I think I had a bit more to

spend on a wedding dress than people who marry a little younger. In a time when people haven't got much money, I think this is a great way to own a beautiful dress without spending a fortune. Most dresses are worn for about eight hours. Once they have been dry cleaned, they are as good as new," says Levey.

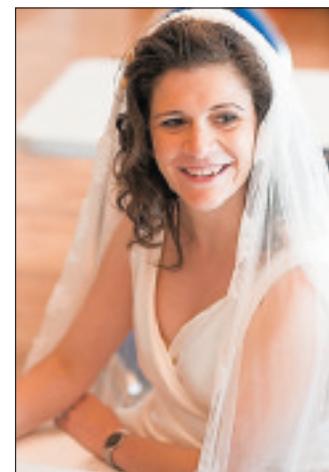
"I think it is nice to own a dress which someone else has loved."

Levey intends to hold an event every two months if the first one is successful.

■ Visits to the sale are by appointment, maximum five peo-

ple at one time. To make an appointment, visit www.chiceco.co.uk or call 07931 778427.

This is a great way to own a beautiful dress without spending a fortune



■ This 1930s-style dress, from the Vintage Wedding Dress Company, will be part of the sale
Picture: Adrian Pope