

» Restaurant review

Tapas takes sting out of jilted critic's angst

Joseph Connolly finds himself all alone after being stood up by a publisher. But he discovers the ultimate comfort food and, best of all, he doesn't have to share

» Luncheon. Not a word you really hear bandied about any more. Lunch has become the universal term for this supreme institution – many, perhaps, being unaware that this word is even an abbreviation at all. I do very much like the word lunch – it savours of munch while smacking of crunch – though still its ubiquity is rather peculiar: I mean – no one talks of din, do they? Well I do actually, but then I'm very odd. These days, though, it is hard to say 'luncheon' without coming across as Lady Bracknell, or else maybe recalling the glory days of Luncheon Vouchers (not to say 'pork luncheon meat') – and when you talk of 'luncheon for one', a picture is conjured of a solitary rep in a Terence Rattigan boarding house at his usual corner square table, its cloth laid in diamond fashion, where the cruets and sauce bottles stand sentry eternally.

Yes well that's what I had just the other day: luncheon for one. Yes – just me, all on my tod. And why should this be, you might wonder? For readers of this column will know that I very much enjoy the company of my guests – the clinking of glasses and all the foodie chat. So possibly I was in 'creative artist mode' then, was I? A thought-

ful wordsmith at one with just his imagination, silently absorbing the passing scene ...? No – I was alone because I'd been bloody stood up. I know. By a lady publisher. Believe it? I mean to say – what sort of tragicomic figure can I have cut? The stood-up restaurant critic – in of all places a tapas restaurant, where ideally one ought to be of a party of four to six, the better to graze and dip into all the little dishes. But no – just me. I would have given all you ladies out there a ring, actually, and invited you down to make up the numbers – but by the time you had bathed and scented yourself, selected a suitable luncheon frock and had the car sent round, I might have paid the bill and gone.

Popular

I'd heard rather good things about El Parador – a popular place that has been in this not very prepossessing stretch of Eversholt Street (just around the corner from the ghost of Mornington Crescent tube station) for twenty-three years: amid the ever shifting phantasmagoria that is Camden Town, this makes it practically ancient regime. So anyway – I had arrived deliberately early, and for three sound reasons. Two of them were the usual:

I was idly wondering whether one of those weirder stalls at Camden Market might do a range of home-knitted lady publisher voodoo dolls, replete with pins



■ Joseph enjoys good food at reasonable prices at El Parador, near Mornington Crescent

giving myself time to sniff about the place, jotting down the décor and filleting the menu – the other to ensure that I was there, as ever, ahead of my guest for the sake of politesse: ho bloody ho, as it turned out in this case. The third reason was that I'd heard they had a garden – a rare thing in this part of the world – and as it was rather a balmy day, I was keen to bag a table there. I had actually the day before attempted to book one, but they have this rather odd policy of not accepting bookings for parties of just two. How they would have reacted to a party of just the one, I have no idea at all: tie me up on a hook outside with the mongrels, I should imagine. Anyway – at 12.45 on a Tuesday, I was told by the genial proprietor (who has been here since the beginning in 1988) that all forty covers in the garden were taken! Blimiey – a popular place indeed. He was tall, with a completely hairless head – as, I had noticed, were several other men there. I felt a little like an intruder at a Right Said

Fred convention where all the other blokes were more or less just about sexy enough for their shirts.

The atmosphere is pretty close to the cantina feel I think they must be aiming at: paper tablecloths, adobe-like walls and an intriguing and sinuous bar made up of shards of mirror and blue and black tile and glass. By ten past one – sitting at a table set for four and sipping a pink Cava – the sizzling sounds from the griddle and plancha, the appetising aromas, were playing merry havoc with me. I'd enjoyed a couple of gratis black olives, but I needed now to get foodily serious. By quarter past, I was decidedly antsy. Ten minutes later I thought okay – sod you then, lady publisher: I'm going to eat. The proprietor was properly solicitous – took my order of jamon Iberico, prawns, tortilla and meatballs – simply noted them down, and nodded. He did not stand on a chair in the middle of the restaurant banging a gong and shouting out to all the other diners "Hey look at this, everyone! Norman No-Mates here is fi-

nally going to eat all alone while studiously writing in his notebook to try to make it appear as if this entire fiasco was planned from the outset ...!"

I could hardly wait for the food to arrive: there are eleven fish choices, the same of meat, and sixteen for veggies – and I felt I could have demolished the lot. Veg seemed to be the out-and-out favourite here: at one table, the man (bald as the proverbial coot, as seemed de rigueur) said to the woman "Do you eat meat and fish?" and the woman said "No – do you eat meat and fish?" and the man said "No – so just veggie, then?" and the woman said "Yes – but not much". Well I am here to tell them that although they might well have enjoyed their beetroot thing and their artichoke thing and their bean and onion thing (and they did all look very good) they missed out huge time by passing up the terrific chewy and nuggety Spanish ham and very succulent three large pork meatballs in a nicely chunky tomato sauce. Not to say the six also very large, juicy and just garlicky

enough tiger prawns: yum yum. And did I manage to devour the whole great wedge of potato and onion tortilla? Yes I did: I was eating both in greed and a sort of vengeance against my absent guest. I grossly enjoyed it all – along with the glass of red Spanish Peregrino wine: not to be confused with clear Italian Pellegrino water (as if you would). I was also idly wondering whether one of the weirder stalls at Camden Market might conceivably do a range of home-knitted lady publisher voodoo dolls, replete with pins.

Friendly and casual

Actually – I didn't remotely care by now: I was having a whale of a time. It's a very friendly, easy and casual place, El Parador, with pretty high standards: the quality and variety of the food is very good, the service unfussy though attentive, and the prices reasonable. And the great thing about eating tapas all on your own is that you get to order and hog all of your favourites without having to portion them out and leave the last one, out of politeness for someone else to pounce on. Oh yes: quite a discovery, all in all – tapas for one: a pig's paradise

And so at that point – full to the point of explosion – I wandered. Lonely, as a clod.

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

FACTFILE

- **EL PARADOR**
245 Eversholt Street, NW1
Tel: 020-7387 2789
- Open for lunch Monday to Friday noon-3pm. Dinner Monday to Thursday 6pm-11pm, Friday to Saturday 6pm-11.30pm, Sunday 6.30pm-9.30pm
- Food: ★★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★★☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★★☆☆ (Even better, I imagine, if you have someone to talk to)
- Cost: Most little dishes around the £5 to £6 mark. Wine reasonable.

» Small bites Georgia Graham

Shout out your favourite foods with new eco shopping bag

Saving the planet is generally considered a good thing – and there is one by-product of the environmentalist trend which has changed how we shop forever: the canvas tote bag.

The durable shopper has replaced uncouth plastic bags for weekly supermarket trips. But these bags are so much more than a receptacle for organic beetroots and muesli – they say a whole lot about you.

For years, the trendy canvas bag was from the bookshop ones, declaring to the world, 'I read and I read books from an independent store.'

But now there is a new pretender to the It-bag throne. Melrose and Morgan, with stores in Hampstead and Primrose Hill and famous for their delectable treats, chutneys and freshly made heat-up-at-home meals – have introduced a witty

line in canvas bags.

Starting with a roomy "Turkey" bag at Christmas, the range has expanded and foodie fashionistas can now pick ones spelling out their favourite foods, such as rhubarb.

Pickle, apple or cheese

For the more whimsical, why not don a "pickle" bag. How can anyone possibly need that many pickles people will say? For carbohy-

drate lovers, the "bread" tote is ideal. "Apples", meanwhile, may appeal to the wholesome – a perfect paring for "cheese".

They are also the perfect vessel for a gorgeous gourmet picnic lunch to be consumed on nearby Hampstead Heath.

■ The bags are available from Melrose and Morgan at 42 Gloucester Avenue or in Oriol Place.



■ Melrose and Morgan and, inset, one of the store's new bags