

▶ Restaurant review

A touch of cool to the Kentish Town Road

Run by the proprietor of the legendary PJs in Covent Garden, this stylish brasserie offers some good dishes but just needs to improve a little on the details, finds Joseph Connolly

I was clocked. And although you might find this surprising, it doesn't actually happen often – but as soon as I entered Kentish Canteen, I just felt it to be true: a palpable frisson when I gave my name to the very charming lady and she repeated it with such orotund emphasis and precision. Then she gave the nod to her manager who, quite startled, quickly walked into a table. And so I was rather eager to discover whether the progress of lunch would be any different to usual.

It's a very pleasant space, Kentish Canteen: only one year old, and a credit to the area in its spanking apple green livery – hoi polloi on the pavement kept decently at bay by a thicket of privet hedging, the fascia ringed by a ribbon of little light bulbs as last seen fringing a Hollywood starlet's dressing table mirror. Kentish Town Road is not noted for its serene and unnatural beauty, though here we have a cool and generous brasserie with large picture windows looking on to nothing but a big blue sky! There are no buildings whatever opposite, this down to a railway cutting, I think, rather than the locals having torched the whole street in the night. There are in the area one or two attempts at gentrification in the form of such as the chic little coffee

stall called Bean About Town (tee-hee) – though it is bang opposite Cash4Cheques, and surrounded by a motley of red-faced Irishmen very nearly sitting on a bench and uproariously drinking not coffee. Further down there is the most glorious shop called Blustons, very close to the street's other great jewel The Owl Bookshop. Blustons has a remarkable and perfect art deco shopfront of black glass and vast chrome lettering – the old and rare sort of frontage with a set of inviting vitrines in a black-and-white marble foyer that lure you in to the place. They sell tea frocks and costumes and matinee coatees and ladies' underpinnings from the war years and not much beyond, each with a little sign saying things like 'Smart Dress' and 'Latest Style' (this last a lie, at least since Harold Macmillan ceased to be our Prime Minister).

The interior of Kentish Canteen (and full marks for having resisted going with Kanteen) is nice and easy: a large monochrome photographic mural of local bits and bobs, some exposed brickwork, panels of lime and terracotta and an attractive bar hung with extremely glam copper and globular Tom Dixon pendants. There are also slabs of stark white wall with hooks attached – though as yet no pictures are



■ Joseph with Wendy Sinclair, owner of Kentish Canteen, and Dante Mansi, proprietor of Marine Ices

dangling thereon. My guest was Dante Mansi, proprietor of the not-too-distant Marine Ices in Chalk Farm. I asked him about the August riots: Sainsbury's, Evans Cycles and a pizza place nearby were all resoundingly trashed, but – much to his blessed relief – Marine Ices escaped unscathed. He discovered later that there had been posted on Twitter a mass of urgent directives to the marauding hordes not to dare to touch the place: it's good to know not only that this treasured eighty-year-old institution is so valued by even the organisers of civic destruction, but also that even anarchists sometimes will do as they're told.

So Dante kicked off with three cured Spanish meats on a slab of wood, with four tomato bruschetti alongside: four is too many – and the bread, alas and highly surprisingly, was stale. The hams and salami were good, however, as one might expect. I had what was billed as home cured smoked salmon, which though good – flaky, nice texture, authentic fla-

your – was not at all what you would expect when you order smoked salmon: i.e. gossamer and gently smoky slices. The accompanying beetroot soaked blinis were rather dull – though we both did a great deal better with our mains. Dante was enthusing non-stop about his extraordinarily tender and flavourful chicken breast with very good rosemary infused potatoes and (slightly overcooked) broccolini, with a very welcome undertone of anchovy. "Excellent," is what he said. "I'm very, very happy with this." I had the burger with bacon and melted cheese, and it was a very good burger – might have been almost great had it been cooked medium rare as requested, and not medium. It came not in the usual sesame seed bun but more of a fluffy lightly toasted panini: an improvement, actually. The home made coleslaw was a crunchy delight, while the great golden wedges of hand-cut chips were unequivocally superb. We were drinking a Chianti which I ordered on the grounds that you can't ever

have an excess of Italian geniuses: already there was Dante, and now a wine called Leonardo da Vinci. This spicy red did make me half smile, though still it was no Mona Lisa.

Discerning fellow

My guest was musing about his past acquaintanceship with the area, while we contemplated pud. "There was a tailor around the corner. Made clothes for Spandau Ballet. Also my wedding suit. And a shop called Sid's Surplus Store." "What did you get in there then, Dante? Wife's wedding gown?" "No. Nothing. Never went in. Didn't really want Sid's surplus." Indeed – for he is a discerning fellow, you see: his pride and joy being a 1955 Citroen in the deepest most lustrous cobalt blue, the sweep of the low wings and running boards a thrill to behold, the wink of chrome perfectly dazzling: you can barely believe that this beauty is fifty-six years old. "I know," he agreed. "Same age as my sister. Car's in a lot better nick, of course ..."

The ice cream here is home made, and so my resident expert was instructed to have it ... and he was impressed. "The lemon sorbet is first class – and I love the way they have incorporated the zest. Clotted cream vanilla ice cream ... also very good indeed, but you don't really get the vanilla ...". I had a disappointing English cheese board: three rather mean and cold little triangles, the very sight of which is enough to lower the spirits. My fault, really, for ordering it – you really only should in either clubs, places with a well-kept trolley they are proud of, or else one of the few remaining London restaurants still to offer a proper whole Stilton truckle, which may be gouged before you.

And then it was time for the charming lady, who turned out to be the owner, to come clean about knowing who I was all along. She is called Wendy, and is also the proprietor of the legendary PJs in Covent Garden where I have, over the years, enjoyed many a brunch and early supper in that relaxed yet buzzy atmosphere. So yes, I was clocked – but listen to this: no special treatment! No treats, no gifts, no flattery, and no free booze ...! And I just can't tell you how bloody depressing all of that was.

Kidding. I'm kidding. Honest.

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

FACTFILE

- **KENTISH CANTEEN**
300 Kentish Town Road, NW5
Tel: 020-7485 7331
- Open every day from 9am, though for brunch/lunch 10am-4pm, supper 5pm-10.30pm
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆
- Cost: Very variable – but if you go through the card, then about £80 for three-course meal for two with wine.

There was a tailor around the corner. Made clothes for Spandau Ballet. Also my wedding suit. And a shop called Sid's Surplus Store

▶ Health & beauty Rhiannon Edwards

The massage that'll prove hard to resist for chocolate lovers

A new massage solely using real chocolate is coming to a Golders Green beauty salon.

Even though we are told to eat less chocolate in order to look better, apparently smearing it on our bodies is the way forward.

And, not to be behind the curve, Coco sunlounge and massage centre on Finchley Road is offering the treatment, which involves unedible chocolate being applied to the skin.

The massage lasts one and a half hours and, while being

pampered, a square of chocolate is popped into your mouth – possibly in the hope that you won't try to eat yourself.

Aroma therapy

"This is a sensual massage, which incorporates the sweet aroma therapy of chocolate and the boosting benefits for skin," says Renee, owner of Coco.

It is thought that Theobromine, which is similar to caffeine and is found in chocolate, produces a slimming effect on the body and helps to diminish

cellulite. The fats in chocolate are also thought to plump and firm the skin. Who knew?

The chocolate sensation is part of the sometimes unusual roster at the longstanding beauty shop.

They also have an infrared sauna, which is said to aid slimming by penetrating deep into the body tissue. It sounds a bit hostile but apparently it is not damaging at all.

The massage comes not long after news broke that eating dark chocolate could be as good

for you as jogging.

The claim has since been bulldozed by health officials although the study did show that epicatechin, found in dark chocolate, had an effect on animal muscle performance.

Either way, rolling around in chocolate for an hour and a half sounds like fun even if it doesn't work. Let's just hope the fire alarm doesn't go off.

■ A chocolate massage costs £85 for one and a half hours. Call 020-8458 5678.



■ The fats in chocolate are thought to plump and firm the skin