

Restaurant review

Princess fails to win a place in our hearts

A royal banquet is not on the cards at this much-loved institution – with dry starters, a poorly cooked steak and a badly-chosen replacement wine, finds Joseph Connolly

Although she is almost entirely forgotten now, the Princess of Wales used once to be a fairly well known figure. She was married to Prince Charles, and therefore destined to become Queen; this was not to be, however, because she died very tragically in a car crash in Paris. Do you vaguely remember who I mean, now? Ring any bells? Blonde, name of Diana: self-confessedly thick, hated quite a lot of things: rural pursuits, reading books, classical music, obscurity, Prince Charles ... while loving very much clothes, limelight, pop concerts, he-men and other sorts of men too, such as Eton John and Gianni Versace. Some considered her to be Princess Of Our Hearts and close to sainthood, while others were of the opinion that she was a vain, empty-headed and self-serving lunatic. If this were true, then when she died the whole of this country, along with great chunks of the rest of the world, collectively lost its mind in sympathy. When not blanketing the gardens of Kensington Palace with cellophane wrapped flowers and teddy bears, people were rapidly rebranding pubs: many that had formerly and for centuries been the called The Prince of Wales suddenly changed gender: and so her name and image live on as a series of badly painted portraits swinging high above boozers. You might wonder, now that Charles has remarried, why there is not a new Princess – and that's a damn good question: the wife of the Prince of Wales is the Princess of

Wales, no? Not the Duchess of Cornwall. When William accedes to the title, will he and his missus be the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cambridge? I rather think not. It's high time that Camilla received her due, then.

Interesting nooks

Anyway ... the Princess of Wales in Primrose Hill has, so far as I am aware, always been called that, and is a much-loved local institution. Although it has long held a reputation for above average grub, the pubby interior has been wisely and cleverly retained. A proper bar with proper beer pumps, and all sort of interesting nooks and corners in which to eat, the walls covered with an eclectic mix of old mirrors, old prints, old books: an artful arrangement of comfortable junk. There is also an attractive terrace whose walls also are obliterated by mirrors, as well as what looks like a Banksy. My guest for lunch was Rhiannon Edwards, acting features editor for this very paper. You know her byline very well – she reviews books and plays and conducts interviews as well as tying together the whole of the Etcetera section and having to cope with bloody writers such as myself. She has attained this lofty position astonishingly rapidly: a short while doing shift work on the Daily Express, a bit of listings work and writing for the Ham&High – and then whoosh! Here she is. Despite the Welsh sounding name, she actually hails from Yorkshire, was christened Rhiannon after a song



Joseph with Ham&High acting features editor Rhiannon Edwards at Primrose Hill's Princess of Wales

by Fleetwood Mac, and is probably very profoundly fed up with people telling her that she's lucky she isn't called Albatross.

Our table was set with a little vase containing one yellow and one red gerbera, and the menu was astoundingly huge: there are quite literally dozens of options, and fourteen more 'specials' on an elaborately gilt-framed blackboard: a huge deep freeze, then. Largely it is Italian – lots of pasta, pizza and risotto – but also all the good old staples such as pies, steaks and fish and chips. From said blackboard, Rhiannon was going for Sicilian golden rice balls with cheese because she had never before seen such a thing, and then a sirloin steak and chips with black peppercorn sauce. "I don't actually like chips," she said. "Well no – I do like chips, but I don't like the idea of chips. I think it's

because I'm from Huddersfield, and it's a bit of a cliché." Does she miss the old place? "I go back a lot. Where I'm from is normal. While Hampstead is ... interesting". The rice balls were three in number, and enormous: the size of fishcakes. The first she thought rather dry, the cheese undetectable; the second was much better, and the third just too much, full stop. Which is more or less what I felt about my whitebait: they were bread-crumbed, which I'd not met before, and therefore orange and very crunchy. Ultimately, however, all I was eating was crunch, and then the oil in which they were deep fried. I left quite a lot.

Rhiannon's steak – from the much repeated Marylebone butcher The Ginger Pig – was large and luscious looking ... but she had requested rare, and this was medium to well done: oh

dear. So that had to go back – and they swiped the big and golden chips as well, and I'd only had the one (which was excellent). I had pollo alla crema – a leg and breast portion of chicken in an extremely good cream and mushroom sauce, with nice al dente spaghetti: this they didn't remove, however, and so I was eating very slowly ... "It takes a restaurant fifteen minutes to do another steak," Rhiannon was musing philosophically. "Thirteen minutes of effing and blinding, and another two to cook the thing". From the very large selection of wine I had ordered a Sicilian Nero d'Avola – and so was rather surprised to be tasting an Australian Shiraz. "It's the only Shiraz we've got," explained the chap. "But I didn't order a Shiraz – Nero d'Avola is a rather different grape". "Well," he opined, "maybe we should change the list –

because this is the closest we've got". As in not close at all, then. Curious, no ...? Fortunately, it wasn't at all bad. The replacement steak was even huger, properly rare, though with an unadvertised and largely unwelcome thick hunk of bacon on the top of it. The new bowl of chips, alas, wasn't a patch on the first – though the steak and peppercorn sauce was much enjoyed. "But the salad should be rockety," thought Rhiannon. "All this lettuce is very boring."

Eton mess

It's a comfortingly shabby and pleasantly informal place, this – though maybe the informality shouldn't extend to dumping on the table a teacup rammed with sachets of Heinz and Hellmann's, nor to stacking up and scraping the dirty dishes right under one's nose. Later on, Rhiannon decided she'd rather like an Eton Mess ... but we were told that chef had gone home. But somewhere in the kitchen, still there lingers an Eton Mess, I suggested ...? No: kitchen's closed. A pity. And on such a note, so ended our lunch with the Princess of Wales: snuffed out. Like a candle in the wind.

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

FACTFILE

- **PRINCESS OF WALES**
22 Chalcot Road, NW1
Tel: 020-7722 0354
- Open for lunch and dinner every day. Much praised roasts on Sunday.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆
- Cost: Quite reasonable for very generous quantities. About £50 for two course meal for two with wine.

Small bites Rhiannon Edwards

Takeaway is given a makeover as chefs selected to deliver gourmet treats to door

However oxymoronic the phrase "gourmet takeaway" may sound, a new website has been created to deliver just that. And surprisingly, the food is, well, rather good.

As a student, I can't count how many times a fellow undergrad, with either soggy pizza or a forkful of grey curry in hand, chimed out: "I've got a great idea – why don't we create a takeaway that's, like, good?"

Well Housebites.com isn't exactly aimed at the student population but it is a welcome break from the dilapidated mush that sometimes doorsteps me on one of my lazier culinary days (which still happen even though I am,



■ Chef Laurent Rossi

sadly, no longer a student). I was invited to try out the new site, which was launched only a couple of weeks ago

and is trialling in north west London. Its creator, Simon Prockter, has scouted out a host of chefs local to the area so that, when I type in my postcode, a flurry of faces pop up with tempting menus. Today, there's a woman in west London cooking lovely curry and a man called Wesley who's got some self-titled signature jerk chicken on offer. It sounds very yummy, although these two are pick-up only, so they are off the cards as I am feeling particularly lazy.

The non pick-up choices are just as interesting. There's also a chef called Mehri Dastgardi who has Persian cuisine on offer and

even a health food takeaway from a woman called Anna Freedman who is a trained macrobiotic cook and health coach. What it lacks in number, it makes up for in variety.

French dishes

There's also Laurent Rossi, who has worked at No 1 Lombard Street, L'Oranger in Mayfair, and L'Aventure in St John's Wood. He's even won awards. "This is already better than Dominos," I think, as I make my selection on the website.

I opt for Laurent's French food because I've never had a French takeaway and the food looks impressive. I go

for a goat's cheese salad and charlotte de saumon fume with caviar to start. Poulet à l'estragon and a fillet of sea bass with herb butter are the mains with some sides of roasted vegetables and sautéed potatoes and a chocolate mousse to finish.

The food is delivered by the man himself and he is as passionate as you expect him to be. Rossi is a chocolatier, too, and he's even given me a sample of lovely chocolates with my chocolate mousse.

On eating, the first thing that strikes me is the quality, the chicken is full of flavour and cooked well and the sea bass is also spot on. Importantly, everything is in the

state it is supposed to be in. The hot food is hot, the salad is crispy and fresh and the presentation is just right. The charlotte de saumon fume is so well presented in its neat little box, it looks like someone scooped it up off the plate of a banker at a Mayfair eatery and brought it to me instead.

At £34 for the lot (with a 25 per cent discount for my first order), it's not that cheap, but it is tasty. Rossi's creation is better than some of the restaurant food I've eaten recently and it's a far cry from soggy pizza. It seems lazy days don't have to be a culinary compromise after all.