

» Restaurant review

A curious eaterie with a very curious menu

Joseph Connolly ventures out on Guy Fawkes Night – not for the fireworks but to dine. He finds himself in the quirky Tandis sampling their unusual but pleasing food

On Bonfire Night, I tottered down Haverstock Hill... in the drizzle. The quest was not for Guy Fawkes, but – as usual – simply grub. Though in Hampstead at this time of year, it's impossible to avoid all the rockets and whizzbangs: in my street, they tend to kick off long before Hallowe'en and peter out with reluctance some time during the second week of January. So there was plenty of fizzing and popping in the night sky on my way down to Tandis – a warm and welcoming looking place at that nebulous point in NW3 that is neither Belsize nor Chalk Farm, this making it something of a deliberate destination rather than an impulse restaurant. Because it is in a kind of a cul-de-sac raised up from the pavement, there is an ample outside space – covered by an awning with tables and chairs, though no sign of any heaters: and therefore, on a November Saturday evening, rather sadly deserted.

Inside we have a very consciously “designed” space – a curvaceous dropped ceiling above a similarly sinuous mirror-fronted bar, this lit by four shimmering chandeliers that look as though they are made up of icicles. One wall of exposed old brick has curious white daubings on it

– it looks to be the cipher of a sinister cult, or else the purposeful tag or graffito of somebody reasonably demented. There are sideways and upside down letters and lines, and assuming my guest for the evening – the renowned Ham&High cartoonist Ken Pyne – to be more graphically literate than I, I invited an explanation: he was utterly stumped. It turns out to be a scrambling of the word Tandis – and in order to work that out you would have to stand on your head, quite drunk, and very lucky indeed. There are parallel oddities on the doors of the (rather swish) downstairs lavatories: a U conjoined with another U, and then the same but inverted: “bums up and bums down” is what Ken called them, I'm afraid – but they're meant to be a W and an M. There's also a big red three-dimensional T over the bar – but it leans to the side, and this is deliberate.

The menu, gratifyingly, is printed the right way up throughout. Tandis bills itself as Persian rather than Iranian – presumably because while the former conjures up rich red rugs and sleekly expensive cats, the latter is in danger of invoking the shadow of latent nuclear devastation. The very polite and efficient staff are



all Iranian and there are authentic touches such as screwy yodelling music (though mercifully soft) and a cluster of brass and coloured hookahs. Which reminded me of a restaurant on Edgware Road some years back that offered for the opening weekend complimentary hookahs, day and night: the place was inundated to the point of riot because on the flyers they had spelt the word “hookers”.

Cuisine

The many starters are divided into hot and cold, and so we had one of each. For Ken, yoghurt and crushed wild Persian elephant garlic (which, as all gourmets will be aware, is garlic reclaimed from the gullet of the rare Persian elephant, which is of course precisely what makes him go wild). And I had something called a “herbs souffle” with parsley, coriander, leek, dill, garlic and egg. The yoghurt was as you might expect – gooey and punchily seasoned – and Ken was shovelling it on to the naan bread with gusto. As to

my souffle... well firstly, you must cast out of your mind any souffle you have ever seen, tasted or heard of. Puffy, frothy, eggy, ethereal...? No no: dark brown solid triangles, looking more like chocolate brownies than anything. How dark brown? Don't know. Where was the egg? Don't know. The taste was okay at first, but then quite bitingly bitter. Mains tend to be either traditional stews or grilled kebabs – a large and seductive choice, though very heavy on chicken and lamb. Ken very much liked his pleasingly aromatic stew of diced lamb with kidney beans, fresh herbs, sun dried limes and steamed rice. I envied him the rich gravy absorbing the rice: I had very flavoursome and tender large chunks of chicken that had been skewered, though some sort of sauce for all of the rice would have been nice. Even better than the chicken was another kebab of minced lamb – so very intense, yet delicately seasoned (and how do they get minced lamb to stick to a stick...?).

At this point, we sipped Nero d'Avola (Sicilian red, and a very reasonable wine at a more than reasonable £13.50) and were watching through the window the most spectacular firework display that seemed to emanate from a private garden in Parkhill Road: it went on for half an hour, was expertly choreographed and must have cost a million quid. During our chat I found out that Ken has been very involved with all of the shenanigans surrounding the 50th anniversary of Private Eye, to which he often contributes, and has done for decades. There was a huge party at the Guildhall and I asked him who was all there. “Well,” he replied, “as it was largely made up of cartoonists and hacks, very few were all there.” There was another party at the V&A to launch an exhibition, which you really ought to go to. One of the highlights is a short film of Ken on a loop which gives fascinating insight into his modus operandi – proper nibbed mapping pens – and a fair flavour of his usual good

humour and modesty: you can also catch it on the V&A website. “People are always so surprised to learn that I don't just work for the Ham&High.”

It's a fairly comfortable place to linger, save for the fact that periodically very shrill bells will suddenly go off – apparently startling no one except Ken and myself, who ritually hit the ceiling each and every time. But we loitered for a shared pudding, which actually turned out to be large enough for four: Persian ice cream – surprisingly good and creamy – with starch noodle sorbet. This came as cubes of white iciness, dusted with coconut: one cube would do you. Then there were diamonds of intensely sweet baklava sort of pastry things – which are, according to Ken, a strong contributing factor to the wealth of Hampstead dentists. You get a lot of food for your money here, most of it very good: we were more than replete. And we didn't even have to walk home because Tandis lays on free Persian flying carpets...! Actually, they don't: not even so much as a complimentary hooker. So we tottered up Haverstock Hill... in the drizzle.

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

FACTFILE

- **TANDIS**
73 Haverstock Hill, NW3
Tel: 020-7586 8079
- Open Monday to Thursday and Sunday noon-11.30pm. Friday to Saturday noon-midnight.
- Food: ★★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★★☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★★☆☆
- Cost: Very reasonable for the quality and quantity. About £60 for three course meal for two with wine.

As to my souffle... well firstly, you must cast out of your mind any souffle you have ever seen, tasted or heard of

continental cousins brighten up Heath as nights draw in

Thrushes

Numbers of some common or garden or Heath birds, such as starlings, blackbirds and robins, are building as residents are joined by many thousands of continental cousins, attracted to our relatively mild winters.

Interestingly, the behaviour of some of these birds (blackbirds, for example) can hint at where the bird comes from, with the foreigners often being somewhat less confident. These are probably rural, forest birds, less used

to humans, bird tables and feeders. Closely related to the blackbird are two species of thrush which breed in south Scandinavia and beyond and are now arriving in the UK in vast numbers. Both are highly spottable on the Heath at the moment, both are extremely handsome. The fieldfare nearly matches a mistle thrush for size. It has a grey head and rump, interrupted by a chestnut brown back. An inky black end to its long tail completes its handsome overcoat. Underneath, it has a

burnt yellow breast and white armpits. The fieldfare is very often heard before it is seen, its laughter-like “chattering” betraying its location in a hedgerow. The redwing is smaller and darker, not quite the size of a song thrush. It has a slightly sinister creamy yellow eyebrow and bloody armpits and flanks.

Both species are gregarious and like nothing better than to congregate on hedgerows or adjacent meadows so Parliament Hill and the Heath Extension are pre-

ferred locations, but they could pop up anywhere on the Heath. Considering that numbers of each of these species top a million in the UK in the winter, it is surprising that many people miss these lovely birds. Make sure that you're not one of them.

■ Visit www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/hampstead to see the Wildlife Heath Happenings page which gives an informal insight into the Heath's seasonal wildlife highlights. Follow the team on Twitter @CityCorpHeath.



■ Tawny owls are at their most vocal over the coming months