

Greek mystery: why would anyone eat here?

Though no fan of Hellenic cuisine, our intrepid reviewer tried out Retsina in Belsize Village. He found it no more to his liking than the wine of the same name

Greece is the word: it's got groove, it's got meaning. Though quite what might be its groove these days, let alone its meaning, is anyone's guess, quite frankly. Ancient Greece is one thing: the cradle of civilisation. Modern Greece is quite another: famous only as bestower to the world of Demis Roussos, Kojak, Melina Mercouri losing her marbles ... help, I'm running out ... and oh yes, Zorba, with that maddening bloody tune, and even more maddening bum-wiggling little dance. Not to mention bankruptcy and impending exclusion from the eurozone: for a while there, the country did seem poised upon making a drachma out of a crisis.

Never mind: we still have Greek cuisine to celebrate, don't we? Well – no, not really. Even the phrase “Greek cuisine” – it doesn't quite ring true, does it? Not in the way of French, Italian or Spanish, say. I'm always astounded that in London – given the limitless breadth of restaurants on offer – how people could even dream of going for Greek in preference to ... well almost anything, really, but often they do seem to. And particularly to Lemonia in Regent's Park Road (which I have yet to visit) and Retsina in Belsize Village. Now retsina, as we all know, is a quite unbelievably vile wine, deliberately made so by the ancient Greeks. They had become mighty fed up, you see, of the invading Romans nicking all their good wine, so they covered the amphorae with a thick layer of pine resin (hence the origin of the name) and for two good reasons: to preserve the wine, and to render it utterly repellant to all those beastly Romans. In both cases the proc-



■ Joseph Connolly poses for a quick photo at Retsina while the owner's attention was elsewhere

ess worked admirably, and it's not just the Romans who have been utterly repelled by it ever since. A glass of retsina makes a very good case for switching to something altogether rounder and more palatable – turps, say.

Starkly lit

Anyway, after this stuff the restaurant is named. It is something of an institution,

having been in NW3 for nearly 30 years, the past seven in its present location. The double frontage is very ugly indeed: slabs of mushroom-coloured board relieved only by blank utilitarian windows: it resembles a hastily converted garage. And I advise you not to enter too hastily, as the door opens directly on to the plunge of a downward staircase. The space is large and airy – com-

pletely white down to the tiled flooring, and rather starkly lit by way of what appear to be a series of 1960s coffee tables bolted upside down to the ceiling: if they bunged a couple of chairs up there, the Alice in Wonderland effect would be complete.

The welcome is smiley, the tablecloths and napkins proper – so a good beginning. A bowl of raw carrots and black olives is placed upon the table – and because it was a chill and drizzly evening, I thought my wife and I could do with a drink. Now they had lots of French, Italian and Chilean wines, but when in Athens, yes? So I selected a bottle of Greek. I know. I was going to go for Othello – not on the grounds that it might be yummily moreish, no, no, but because the list described it as light and fruity in the style of Beaujolais. But the waiter said that Kouros was better, so I ordered that instead (though not without trepidation, Kouros being the name of a YSL aftershave). Well what can I say? It was all right. Bit flat. Bit swinish on the swallow. But at least a million miles ahead of retsina, in that we did actually drink it. I had wanted to precede this with a glass of Prosecco, but they sell it only by the bottle. A woman at an adjacent table asked for

a glass of champagne ... but they sell it only by the bottle. Every day and night they must refuse people a glass of bubbles, because they sell it only by the bottle: go figure.

We shared a plate of hot starters: haloumi (grilled cheese, and rather good), loukanika (spicy sausage, and very good indeed), lountza (smoked pork loin, but actually salty gammon) and dolmades (vine leaved stuffed with rice – for people who actually, honestly, enjoy eating vine leaves stuffed with rice). And at this point, the proprietress came over to the table. And just stood there. Smiling, admittedly, but still just standing there. “Hello?” I ventured. She was eyeing my notebook. “You are copying my menu,” she said. “Copying? No no. Just a few notes, you know.” “You have written ‘lamb souvla,’” she accused (great eyesight, give her her due). “You are copying my menu.” Dear God: I thought she was about to place me under house arrest. This had to be a demonstration of the friendly warmth and ambience in this family-run establishment, of which I heard tell.

Anyway, I did order lamb souvla: large spit-roasted chunks of fillet, though, alas, not succulent as promised on the menu. Dry, overcooked and without seasoning. The accompanying

tzatziki was okay – the usual yoghurt, though the mintiness was nice. I had also asked for roast potatoes, which of course weren't roast potatoes at all: deep fried, and rather floury. My wife had stifado, which is a classic: it ought to be a very rich and hearty beef stew with red wine, onions, tomatoes and so on ... but this was a rather thin thing, and no more than just about all right. Now I know that in dishes such as this it is prudent to use the lesser cuts of beef, but this – though tender enough – was stringy, which you really don't want, and the winey richness was notably missing. “It rather soon becomes quite boring,” my wife said, rather soon becoming quite bored.

Grubby menu

We selected just the one pudding from the grubby and sticky laminated menu, half of which was given over to technicolor pictures of various bought-in ice creams and bombes. I hate laminated menus – deplore them – but the sole raison d'être is their cleanability, yes? So why not bloody well clean them then, hey? So pudding: we went for a standard: yoghurt, honey and nuts, which, to be fair, was yoghurt, honey and nuts: what's to say? And then in something of a panic, we very quickly got the photograph done when the proprietress wasn't looking – or else I think she might have had me run in for copying her décor.

STOP PRESS: the financial crisis in Greece is now so acute that it has resulted in the curtailment of production of all taramasalata and hoummos: yes, folks – it's a double-dip recession.

Factfile

■ **Retsina**
48-50 Belsize Lane NW3
Tel 020 7431 5855

Open for lunch Tuesday-Saturday noon-3pm, dinner Monday-Saturday 6pm-11pm. Sunday all day.

FOOD

★★★★☆☆☆☆

SERVICE

★★★★★★☆☆ (apart from Big Sister Watching Over You)

THE FEELING

★★★★☆☆☆☆

■ **COST** About £80 for three course meal for two with wine (including a hateful 'cover charge')

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



■ Venerable port bottles in the Ramos Pinto cellar