

Restaurant review Joseph Connolly

This palace has substance to go with style

The Phoenix Palace offers plenty of reasons to make a return visit for our diners, who talk shop over their selection from a colossal menu

The phoenix, as well you know, is a mythical bird with a long and lustrous tail of scarlet, gold and purple – and when it is poised upon the cusp of shuffling off its mortal coil (after a thousand years, give or take) it builds itself a nest of twigs and then, rather as you might expect, self-combusts: rather in the manner of the ghastly Krook, in Bleak House. And there rises from the ashes a brand new phoenix, and off we go again: as a party trick, I think you'll agree, it takes some beating. Though I'm not quite sure why this very fabulous restaurant just off Marylebone Road should ally itself with the phoenix, unless for the suggestion that it's going to be around forever. Maybe it's just that very fabulousness and colour that are being referred to here – because certainly the interior lives up to the 'palace' part of the restaurant's name: my Lord, this is indeed a Chinese emperor's palace, and then some! You get an inkling even in the street: a golden façade, and a large red carpet on the pavement that reads 'Welcome', together with its equivalent in Chinese. Or, at least, so I assume: the Chinese script might well say 'Push Off, You Miserable Sod!', though I hardly think it likely. And once within, the splendour begins: a vast and glossy marble floor with

an inlay of the 'happiness' symbol (or the 'prosperity' symbol ... maybe the 'long life' symbol: one of those symbols, anyway) while the ceiling is wholly given over to lit-up stained glass and glorious pendant lanterns. The marble floor then gives way to thick carpet as the scale of the place becomes increasingly clear: magnificent rosewood and gold fretwork columns and panels, carved soapstone light balls and cornices that subtly change colour and fantastic red dragons writhing across the murals. It isn't gaudy, though – just expansive, opulent, very impressive and a great place to be.

My guest for lunch was Fleet Street legend Peter McKay – I thought he'd appreciate the general flamboyance, and so he actively did. It is almost impossible to condense the extent of Peter's journalistic experience: Daily Express, Sunday Times, Evening Standard ... and for a very long time the Daily Mail, where he continues to flourish. He has been everything from a Washington Correspondent to a very witty columnist and gossip connoisseur (formerly William Hickey in the Express, currently Ephraim Hardcastle in the Mail). With Nigel Dempster he wrote the Grovel column in Private Eye (along with lots of funnies)



■ The stunning interior of the Phoenix Palace in Marylebone

and briefly he was Mr Punch, a role he was born to play. This was in the 1980s, when Mohammad al Fayed bought the defunct title (along with the legendary lunch table and the peerless cartoon archive) while Peter's brief as editor was to attack Private Eye, which wasn't really on the cards. Indeed, Peter is still a great chum of the Eye's former editor Richard Ingrams: as you read this, they both are cruising the length of the Nile. I still do rather think of Peter as Mr Punch, though: it's the mischievous twinkle in his eye.

The menu here is suitably colossal: literally hundreds of options sensibly divided by primary ingredient: lobster, crab, soup, dim sum, scallop, prawn, abalone, fish, eel, oyster, beef, squid, chicken, duck, lamb, pork, game, vegetable, noodles, rice ... oh God: on and on for ever. So to a background of soft and plinky Suzie Wong music, we went for grilled Dover sole with ginger and garlic soya, Cantonese fillet

steak, lemon chicken, spicy Singapore noodles and prawn fried rice. Less than quarter of an inch of Beaujolais Villages (at a reasonable £19) was grudgingly dripped into my glass, by way of a taster: I requested a larger glug (i.e. one I could actually see) but the waiter explained to me that he couldn't do it because if he did and I didn't like it, then the wholesaler wouldn't take back the bottle. Which is a thing I've never before heard in my life ...

Succulent

The sole was slightly overdone, while still managing to be both plentiful and creamy in texture, the seasoning very well balanced. Everything else was truly outstandingly good – and especially the lemon chicken, which was plump and seductively succulent; the rice too, which was just loaded with large and juicy prawns. Peter meanwhile was reminiscing on the only time he has lived in North London – Hendon, actually, in the ear-

ly days. "I was so young," he said, "that I actually thought the shops and restaurants in Golders Green were the most sophisticated in the world ...!" He remembers taking the Ham&High – and still has a high regard for it: "It's the only local paper that is read by people on the nationals: it often provides such very good stories ..."

The all-Chinese staff here are very polite and friendly, if sometimes apparently sleepwalking. After rather too long staring at the debris of our huge and very yummy lunch, I suggested to a passing waiter that he might like to clear it away ...? To which he replied very affably "Yeh – why not?". Peter and I really did warm to this restaurant: like me, he had never been before, though already was making plans to return. I can see that it would be even more marvellous in the evening – either for intimate duos or rather more raucous Christmassy get-togethers: there are plenty of large round tables for up to ten people. And everywhere you

look, it's absolutely stunning. Even in the Gents: Chinese yellow decorated porcelain handbasins, mosaic murals and pink glass fretted lit-up panels. Be careful, though – the symbols on both the Ladies and Gents are of chubby stylised Orientals, each of them wearing a dress. Peter, alas, had to be slightly careful on the wine front because he had whooshed along from the Mail offices in Kensington on a scooter (his other bike being a Harley Davidson, but of course). "I've always had a thing about motorbikes," he said. "And golf. Well golf ... it's all very naff, of course – the clothes, the cliché of it ... which is half the fun. But it's the clubs I really love". And by this I feel sure that he does not mean brassies, niblicks, wedges and putters so much as the cameraderie at the Nineteenth Hole.

And then he had to leave to attend to a deadline: I watched him go, as he waved goodbye: he seemed as pleased as Punch. And suddenly (this happens to me sometimes) I was craving a Havana cigar – not just for the peace and flavour of it, but also, I confess, so that then I could have told you that when it became time to take my leave of the Phoenix Palace, I rose from its ashes.

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

FACTFILE

PHOENIX PALACE
5 Glentworth Street, NW1
Tel: 020-7486 3515
Open Monday to Saturday noon-11.30pm. Sunday 11am-10.30pm
Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆
Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆
The Feeling: ★★★★★★★★★★
Cost: Well ... expensive, as Chinese goes, but so worth it. Maybe £100 for two, with drink. Maybe more.



■ Joseph with Fleet Street legend Peter McKay

lots of very attractive alternative fizzes out there

is a very personal selection, often at good discounts, but that's not the reason for including them. And alongside the champagnes there are some good, good-value alternatives.

M&S has reductions on lots of champagnes, but sadly not on the very stylish Tarlant Brut Nature (£30), smartly balancing maturity and freshness. But bargain party fizz Bellante Rosé from the prosecco region, pretty and very drinkable, is down £2 to £8 until January 1.

Majestic is offering Louis Roederer Brut Premier at a very tempting £27. It's my favourite big-brand non-vintage champagne, always elegantly delicious (honest – I'm not

influenced by the privilege of being 2011 Roederer Regional Wine Writer of the Year). The happy party choice is Extra de Cordorniu Brut (£6.50).

Offers

Waitrose has good offers even if they don't quite match some competitors'. There is, though, a five per cent reduction if you buy any six bottles. Roederer Brut Premier is £29.60, Piper Heidsieck Brut £22.50 (£19.32 at the Co-op) and Taittinger Brut Reserve £27 (£25 in an unopened case of six at Great Western Wine). GWW also has Jacquart Brut Mosaïque at £21.20, again if you buy six.

The tempting party wine at Wait-

rose is San Leo Prosecco, down a third to £6.66, and you could fly the English flag proudly with Ridgeview Bloomsbury 2009 (£22) or pink Fitzrovia 2009 (£23), both so close to good champagne that you have to see the bottle to spot the difference.

Supermarket own brands can be decent and well-priced, and trustworthy independents also have good champagnes at good prices: Jeroboams, The Wine Society, Vintage Roots (for the fine bottles from organic grower Jean-Pierre Fleury) are examples. There's time still to order for pre-December 25 delivery (www.greatwesternwine.co.uk, www.thewinesociety.com, www.vintageroots.co.uk).



■ Autumn vineyards in the Cote des Blancs