

## Restaurant review Joseph Connolly

# A new addition to Rino's Hampstead stable

The man behind the romantic Coffee Cup and the glamorous Villa Bianca now brings us Piccola – a friendly Italian offering comforting food

Few would argue that two of Hampstead Village's greatest and most enduring institutions are Villa Bianca in Perrin's Lane, and the mighty Coffee Cup just around the corner in the High Street. They both have been a vibrant and vital part of the Village scene for just about ever: the Coffee Cup has the romance, Villa Bianca the glamour. Wear a duffel coat and desert boots in the Coffee Cup, bring an old Penguin paperback, drone on about Dave Brubeck and Jack Kerouac ... well it could be the 1950s, couldn't it? Lay out much more dosh at the VB, this time don an open neck white linen shirt and glinting medallion with navy suit ... and if you squint a bit, you might be in Portofino. Well now there's a new kid on the block which rather cleverly splits the difference between the two: Piccola in Heath Street, on the site of the old Frascati. And guess what? All three of them are run by the same man, Rino Mollura – who maybe when just a bambino in Naples was instructed to 'See Hampstead And Die'. But he saw Hampstead, and he didn't die: instead he made a living.

Piccola is – and the name is a clue – a little restaurant of maybe thirty to forty covers, and when it's full (as it was the Saturday evening my wife and I were there) the noise levels can be fairly worrying. This is part of the VB tradition: on a packed night there the acoustics can make you deranged. It's quite pretty from the outside – the awning proclaiming it to be a 'Pizzeria Napolitana'. An understatement, as it turns out: they do offer 17 pizzas (each freshly cooked in a vast copper oven which has been newly imported from Naples, and too near to which I was seated (God I was hot – felt as if I was deep within the thing, being gently melted, then crisped and topped with pepperoni). But there are loads of

other dishes as well – 15 starters, the same of pasta, risottos, fish, meat ... the works.

The interior is rather disappointingly drab: they probably consciously avoided the standard trattoria terracotta stippling on the walls, though the dull greyish white they have gone for, allied with the stark yet still dim downlighting, does nothing at all for room nor diners. These walls are however studded with a motley of jaunty pictures: and herein lies an aside. Piccola is actually half-owned by a local QC by the name of Charles Salmon whose (half Italian) wife Vanessa runs an art business specialising in 'joyful and uplifting' works. And so here in Piccola we have an ever-changing selection (for sale: natch). They are all quite colourful, but if each was surmounted by an individual picture light, not only could you see the things properly, but it would cheer up the room one devil of a lot. There was one I rather liked depicting Noddy and Big Ears, with the spirit of which I could wholly identify: for where better to spend one's time than in Toyland? Maintaining the spirit of the extended Italian family, it is Rino Mollura's son-in-law who is head chef here (and he's doing a more than decent job).

### Fizz

Although Prosecco is listed only by the bottle, the extremely polite and able Italian waitress (in smart black breeks and waistcoat, as are all the staff) seemed quite happy to serve us just a couple of glasses. She called my wife 'signora' ... and the lady at the adjacent table she called 'madame': one wonders idly at the distinction. Anyhoo ... food time. We mulled over the pizza and pasta menu while sharing antipasti: a very generous tumble on a thick teak board: good, dry and nutty prosciutto, ditto salami, though rath-



■ Joseph Connolly outside Piccola in Heath Street

er wet and shiny ham – not mortadella ... more something a bit supermarket sandwich: but okay. And frisee (endive) with blobs of mozzarella – of which I'm not a fan, but this was all right (it's just that it always reminds me of the blubbery white that I cut away from a poached egg). My wife had determined on pizza ... but which one? Many of them are named after magnificent Italians: Boccaccio, Caruso, Dante, Puccini, Mussolini ... actually, not that last one. But she went for the signature Piccola: cream, mozzarella, ham, mushrooms and sweetcorn. Now I wanted pasta ... but which one?

There was spaghetti Al Tonno (with tuna), Al Cartoccio (with seafood) and Al Pacino ... and this time, I am not kidding. I think this must be made with finely diced Italian-American mobsters, the whole forming an offer you can't refuse.

But I did: I went for the veal – Scallope Milanese, though with the addition of spaghetti Bolognese (and all this in a Napolitan gaff, I ask you). There's a good range of wine – ranging up to a £48 Amarone (rather soupy and tasting almost fortified, I always think) and down to the house Sangiovese at £14, which I ordered: just what you want from an Italian

house red – light, fruity, gluggable and cheap. The very beautifully gooey-looking pizza was the size of an LP, though infinitely more eatable. The base was properly thin and crisp, the combination of topping quite delightful: when it comes to pizza, they certainly do know what they're doing here. And get this – an unrehearsed quote from my wife: "This is the best pizza I have had in my life". Well. And she's not given to gushing, you know. My veal escalope was thin, lean and perfectly breadcrumb-crusted ... so thin that I thought, uh-oh, this could be leathery: but no – tender, well seasoned and

generous. The accompanying spaghetti Bolognese was not what you would expect – more like vermicelli for a start (very fine indeed – almost like the lurking comfort in chicken noodle soup) with a lot of evident coarsely chopped tomato almost outdoing the meat in the sauce (and skins too, which you really don't want, the result being interdermal irritation for hours to come). Both the flavour and texture were very good ... just not what I would term a Bolognese sauce.

We shared 'Italian ice cream' because you have to, really. I asked a waiter "Where do you source it?" And he said "Italy". Well, you ask a stupid question ... Anyway, the pistachio was pretty good, the vanilla not so: intensely, screamingly sweet and really rather Wall-sy. So here she is: Piccola, the new kid, the little girl – without doubt a valuable addition to the Village scene: Signor Mollura would now seem to have all things Italian well sewn up. For to add to Villa Bianca and the Coffee Cup, here is maybe an institution of the future. And when it comes to Hampstead, I am committed to an institution (or, some think, should be).

■ All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website [www.josephconnolly.co.uk](http://www.josephconnolly.co.uk).

### FACTFILE

#### ■ PICCOLA

33 Heath Street, Hampstead,

NW3

Tel: 020-7431 3274

■ Open noon-11.30pm every day.

Takeaway service also available.

■ Food: ★★★★★☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★☆☆

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆

■ Cost: Really good value. About £70 for three course meal for two with wine, but much less is possible.

## and breathes new life into retro classics

certainly provided more than enough meat although not quite enough mashed neeps.

The duck, likewise, provided a hearty portion with the mallard accompanied by a separate confit leg and served on a bed of braised endive. The attention to detail was second to none with bright round beads of sharp of orange scattered around the plate for a tangy kick.

Dessert was preceded by a second palate-cleansing amuse-bouche in the form of a toffee popcorn liquid which packed in the taste of a night out at the cinema into one

shot glass.

Prior to our visit, I had heard great things about the restaurant's cucumber sandwich dessert which places a cucumber and ginger sorbet between a cucumber mille-feuille with gin and tonic jelly in a Heston-esque feast.

But alas the seasons had changed and winter had brought more warming, hearty dishes.

Bypassing the modern takes on hot trifle and jam roly-poly (if I could, I would have tried them all), we plumped for one portion of chocolate mousse and one carrot cake.

Complete with glazed carrots and small carrot-shaped sweets, the cake hit the spot. But it was the mousse that stole the show with its richness and creaminess combining for an absolute treat.

Chef Shaerf promised a lot but he most certainly delivered.

### FACTFILE

#### ■ ONE BLENHEIM TERRACE

St John's Wood

NW8 0EH

Tel: 020-7372 1722

■ Three-course dinner for two (without drinks) costs about £75.



■ The restaurant looks warm and inviting from the outside