

## ▶ Restaurant review

# It's delightful dining with the demon Barber

Joseph Connolly has a difficult journey to Vinoteca but finds it all worthwhile as he lunches with one of Fleet Street's finest

Vinoteca has been repeatedly recommended to me: an honest and casual eatery in Marylebone where the freshly prepared daily menu is true to its ingredients, and – as the name suggests – wine is a major player. Trouble is – it's not in Marylebone at all. Seymour Place is a turning off Marylebone Road, and that's where I got out of the taxi: one or two restaurants about, but not Vinoteca. Turns out that it's right down the other end. Further turns out that Seymour Place is the length of the bloody M1: nearly as far as Marble Arch, this place was – took me ages to get there, and it was drizzling – so don't you start up with me about this not being a local restaurant, because it was damn well meant to be, and I'm in no mood. Okay?

My guest, the legendary interviewer supreme Lynn Barber, had parked her car in Lisson Grove, assuming much the same as I had – and as she lives in Highgate, had travelled even further. So she was faced with the same very damp and endless route march – though still was smiling and delightful when eventually she arrived, and for this I was piteously grateful. Her real persona quite belies the famous monicker The Demon Barber of Fleet Street (this because her reputation is for presenting her interviewees in maybe not the greatest light: hatchet job, it's called). It is, of course, a badge of pride and guts to have been interviewed by her ... but actually, if you look back on her work, such ferocious notoriety isn't really justified: all she is, apart from waspish and witty, is insightful and scrupulously honest: would you have it any other way? And if someone

comes across in print as a bumptious prat, or stupid, or a nasty bit of work, then it is only his or her attitude and words that have made it so. A recent example in the *Sunday Times*, her current employer, was the tennis ace Rafael Nadal: one of her funniest ever, I thought. "Mmm ..." she says. "I'm still receiving hate mail from all of his Twitter followers ...". And despite having worked extensively for just about every national paper, as well as the *Evening Standard* (to say nothing of *Penthouse* magazine in the very early days – another story, and one she is soon to write) Lynn doesn't regard herself as a Fleet Street animal at all. "Oh no ... I've only ever written for magazines, you see. It is my abiding dread to ever be anywhere where serious news is actually breaking, because I wouldn't know how to file, or what to do with it..."

### Austere

Vinoteca is smartly austere, as is the fashion – not as austere as St John in Clerkenwell, where the head chef here first cut his teeth, but still a dark boarded floor, plain tables and paper napkins. The bar is attractive, and hung with clusters of fluted glass pendants, the library wall of wine a very warming sight. There is no carte – just a daily choice of around six starters and mains, each dish coming with its own recommendation for an accompanying glass of wine.

Nice touches include two pink rosebuds on the table, a basket of good bread and olive oil, and – when you ask for it – a jug of water. I always ask for a jug, though usually



■ Joseph Connolly and Lynn Barber at Vinoteca, gossiping about the inky trade while enjoying marinated bavette and black pudding

receive just a glass that is never refilled: listen to me, restaurateurs – it's only tap water, right? Give the punter a jug!

The wine list itself resembles a closely printed Bible: you'd need to take the afternoon off to actually read the thing – so just decide upon a nationality (they've got the lot) and then be guided by price. I went for a very decent 2006 Burgundy (a little steep at £33) – although I had been intending to drink Duck Pond. This was the (American) wine suggested to go with the rose veal and onion pie with mash and sprout tops. Which sounds good, yes? Well we'll never know – because at 1.30, in a half empty restaurant, they had run out of it: hopeless, really.

So instead I had a grilled and marinated bavette with triple cooked chips, watercress and horseradish, while Lynn was going for the dish of the day: black pudding hash with poached egg.

To start we were sharing crubbeens with watercress and a sauce gribiche (this akin to mayonnaise – crubbeens being an Irish thing: shredded pork in little pancake affairs, these deep fried. They were pretty good – nice crunch, reasonably piggy).

Bavette is a difficult cut of beef – skirt, we call it here. Lean, but unyielding – and although the marinade ought to have ironed all that out a bit, it was still pretty chewy. The "triple cooked chips" did not strike me as

being so, although they were done in proper fat. The skins were on, however – odd – so they rather more resembled oven-cooked wedges.

Lynn's black pudding was also okay, though not a hash at all: slices, is all – but they did merge well with the egg.

Have you seen the film *An Education*, with Carey Mulligan? Awfully good, isn't it? This is based on Lynn's teenage memoir of the same name. "When I heard that a Danish woman, Lone Scherfig, was to direct it, I thought ... oh no: she won't get the Englishness." But Lynn was delighted with the result. "The attention to period detail was extraordinary. I actually bumped into Lone in Hampstead Village, and she asked me if I would mind if

they set the film in 1961 instead of 1960, because then the cars became more colourful ..."

I asked Lynn if still there remained anyone she longed to interview (and did I feel weird to be interviewing Lynn Barber about her interviewing ...? Yes I bleeding well did). "I so wanted to do Lucien Freud, but he wouldn't. Even with the intercession of my mate Tracey Emin, he just wouldn't. Too late now. And I'd love to do Rupert Murdoch".

She likes her food and wine ... so is she a cook, I wonder? "I was so spoiled by my husband – a wonderful classic cook in the French style. He died eight years ago ... and suddenly I realised I didn't know how to boil an egg. So it was takeaways for a long while ... and then I discovered Delia". And which one of us has not?

We rounded off the meal with coffee and the tiniest dusted chocolate truffles you have ever seen – the size of slivers of a sugar cube, though very good for all that – while gossiping idly and ramblingly about the inky trade. Barbers in general – as well you might realise – I have very little time for: Lynn, however, will forever remain the glittering exception.

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

### ▶ FACTFILE

#### ■ VINOTECA

15 Seymour Place, W1

Tel: 020-7724 7288

■ Open Monday to Saturday

noon-11pm. Sunday noon-5pm

■ Food: ★★★★★☆

■ Service: ★★★★★☆

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆

■ Cost: A lot of people go just for the wine, with snacks. But about £80 for a two course meal for two with wine.

oundings create a different world.... well, almost

tic locker. No sooner have I changed into my millionaire white-robe as my facialist Kaylee cheerfully enters.

Today I'm having a Ko-be-Doh facial. It's meant to be a youthful facial, explains Kaylee before giggling "although I suppose you don't really need that". She's right – I am 24 – but again I decide to enter into the spirit of it all.

The whole thing is lovely. I'm under a duvet while my face and shoulders are massaged and what sounds like the *Lord of the Rings* soundtrack plays in the background. Afterwards I'm led to a relaxation room where I

## *I consider squatting in the changing rooms*

have a cup of chamomile tea. After a few minutes of relaxation the journalist in me returns and I decide to go on a mini-quest. In my dressing gown, I explore.

There's a predictably empty gym, and a rather impressive pool area decorated with elaborate mosaic – Turkish bath style – and with what looks like a nude woman swimming in the water. This place is pretty grand, I think,

as I tighten my dressing gown. Rested, perhaps too much, I go off to get changed. My clothes are cold and dull and remind me of the grey drizzle on the other side.

"Is it worth it?" Is the question I have in my mind. The answer is unclear. Come here if you want to travel quickly to a glamorous, but unreal, world.

■ [www.stpancrasspa.co.uk](http://www.stpancrasspa.co.uk)



■ The impressive pool area is decorated with elaborate mosaics