

Restaurant review Joseph Connolly

Too good an experience for likes of ennobled

Gastro pub dining was considerably more expensive than taxpayer subsidised grub at the Lords but I did so much prefer The Bull

Here's a wheeze: how would you like to slash to ribbons the costs of eating out? Hew them right down to size? It's all so very simple: all you have to do is get elected as an MP, or else become ennobled. To be the former, of course, must count as one of the most miserable jobs on earth – pursued only by those who dementedly crave publicity of any hue whatever, or else truly are sufficiently deluded as to imagine that they will ever make the slightest bit of difference to anything at all.

To become a peer ... well that could cost you, of course: you might have to bestow a very fair whack of moolah in all the right directions. On the plus side – and here is the point – if you were to attain such status, then you could dine practically buckshee: for every £10 worth of grub and booze consumed, the MP or peer will pay just £2.40 ... the balance being very magnanimously made up by you! Yes – the punch-drunk taxpayer! The only saving grace is that the food within both the Commons and Lords is perfectly dire: it is as if there is a plague on both their Houses.

Well: back to reality. Eating out these days, as we know, is far from cheap – even in gastropubs, the bill does seem to mount up alarmingly. And I've been to quite a few of these, just lately – the most recent being The Bull in Highgate. I last was here in April 2009 ... it was just the fifth review I had written for this paper, and my wife and I had really the most dreadful time: fatty meat, whiffy fishy smells and offhand service that

bordered upon contempt. I also observed at the time that it was odd (no?) for a pub called The Bull to have a vast and three-dimensional elephant on its forecourt, while illustrating its matchboxes with the silhouette of a giraffe. Well under new ownership the elephant has been encouraged to slope off to wherever it is they go to die, and the interior has been done up to just the right degree: Beaujolais-coloured quarter-height wainscoting, white walls studded with tin signs and enamels extolling various foods and ales, and comfortable chairs and banquettes upholstered in tough-guy raw buckskin, as last witnessed in John Wayne's chaps and holsters.

Beers

My wife, my son and myself had walked across the Heath on a cold and gloriously sunny Monday – the very air was glistening and a-tingle, God being in his heaven – and we were welcomed by the warmth of both the manager and the crackling glow of logs in the traditional grate. Now a Monday lunchtime in January is never going to be seething – and our host quite cheerfully thanked us for increasing his lunch trade by 300 per cent: ie, the place was empty. No matter – the service was polite and attentive, and the L-shaped room is a good place to be. There is a more than decent wine list here – by the glass and bottle – but it is of their extraordinary collection of rather rare beers that clearly they are most proud. Each of the intriguing and unusual dishes on the carte (there is also a



blackboardsworth of daily specials) comes with its own recommendation for an accompanying beer. And they host "beer dinners". They have a "beer school", for heaven's sake. And so by ordering a glass of Côte du Rhone, I really did feel as if I was letting the side down – but my wife rallied round with a glass of Caldera pale ale (from Oregon) which had been tipped to go with her cioppino ("chippino", according to the menu). This is basically a fish stew – cod, prawns and cockles in this case (though normally there's crab as well) with leeks and new potatoes – in something rashly and erroneously described as "spicy bouillabaisse", as if bouillabaisse were merely a sauce or soup and not a very specific and venerated dish in itself.

Before that, the three of us had shared a generous board of antipasti – very good pro-

sciutto, two sorts of salami, pickled slivers of aubergine, shrunken cherry tomatoes and a big bowl of green olives, very nostalgically stuffed with peeping red pimento. To accompany my nabby-pamby and pathetically NW3 glass of French red wine, I was having a whole stuffed chicken breast with creamy mash, seasonal greens and gravy (I asked what it was stuffed with and was told "sort of vegetables"... which sounded sort of okay). The son had gone for chicken, leek and Sierra Nevada suet pie with winter baby vegetables – Sierra Nevada being a Californian ale, although to drink with it (unlike me, he knows a bit about beer) he had chosen Brooklyn lager: made in New York, as the name suggests, but of German and Belgian ingredients (it says here). I think he got the winning dish, actually: the pie was very lovely to look at,

the deeply golden pastry pleated across itself like so much origami, its flavour properly suety. He ate the lot, including the very fresh green beans, baby carrots and similarly infantile parsnips. My wife's fish thing was a tad too spicy, but enjoyed – although not to peel smallish prawns in such a dish does make for a rather tedious annoyance; the sourdough bread and aioli dip were just right. And she simply loved the beer. "It tastes like whisky," she said. Well I just had to try it, didn't I? And I am here to tell you that it was absolutely quite as disgusting as every other beer I have ever been so rash as to sample (with the sole exception of draught Guinness).

My meal was a bit of a let-down: the chicken was dry and overdone, the mash – though quite as creamy as advertised – rendered uneatable by the sheer quanti-

ty of salt in it. A great pity, because the shredded greens and gravy were very good indeed. And then my wife wanted pecan pie with honeycomb ice cream, for the simple reason that never before had she eaten pecan pie or honeycomb ice cream. I was content to watch. A few more people had rolled up by this time, and they seemed to be enjoying themselves. The fire in the grate was really doing the business, occasionally cracking quite alarmingly loudly – rather in the manner of a bullwhip made of tough-guy raw buckskin, as last witnessed in John Wayne's chaps and holsters. The pie was adjudged a hit: half sticky, half chewily resistant and a good crunchy topping. The honeycomb ice cream was speckled with fragments of comb, but otherwise you never would have known. And the bill, as gastropubs go these days, was not too bad at all: around £70 for the three of us. Of course, had I been dining in the Upper House as Lord Connolly of Hampstead, I would have coughed up just £19.40 ... but I did so much prefer being in The Bull.

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

FACTFILE

- **THE BULL**
13 North Hill, N6
Tel: 020-8341 0510
- Open Monday to Wednesday noon-11.30pm, Thursday to Friday noon-midnight, Saturday to Sunday 9.30am-midnight.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆
- Cost: About £60 for three course meal for two with drink.

Small bites Ben Bloom

Lord's just needs to up its game and teas will be a winner

England is well known for its love of afternoon tea and the capital city is not short of options to sample the finest finger sandwiches and fruit scones.

The likes of Claridge's, the Ritz, the Dorchester and the Savoy have spent years building up their reputations as the go-to places for the perfect cup of English Breakfast or Earl Grey.

But the hotels now have a new rival in town with Lord's Cricket Ground deciding to get in on the act.

After a successful debut season last year, the St John's Wood venue has launched eight Sunday afternoon tea sittings for 2012. Usually reserved for players and Marylebone Cricket

Club members, the Grade II*-listed Pavilion provides a stunning setting for a late afternoon bite. Taking place in the Long Room, which overlooks the playing area, the spectacular surroundings cannot be beaten.

But while the location's beauty and grandeur is a winner, the food itself leaves something to be desired.

A comprehensive selection of finger sandwiches is on offer on a traditional tea tray also adorned with a vast selection of pastries and scones.

The dash of mustard in the egg mayonnaise and the thick cut Wiltshire ham in the ham and mustard prove the winners in the sandwich stakes. But the sweets fail to

live up to the savouries.

Hard and heavy, the scones fail to impress and their "homemade preserve" accompaniment is so bland and watery as to render it impossible to determine the flavour.

Hit and miss

The selection of pastries is somewhat hit and miss with an excess of jaffa in the jaffa cake but a tasty slice of carrot cake.

But the Lord's afternoon tea includes something London's finest hotels cannot rival – a tour of the world's finest cricket ground.

The meal is followed by a guided trip around the Lord's museum before a visit to the England dressing

room and an insight into each player's regular changing spot (Andrew Strauss and Kevin Pietersen have a corner of their own – who would have thought?).

From the history of the iconic pavilion, the tour then finishes at the most modern of modern buildings with the award-winning spaceship-shaped media centre.

The tea itself may require a bit of tweaking but the chance to view the fabled Ashes urn up close and dine overlooking the outfield at Lord's is one quite truly unparalleled anywhere else in the world.

Afternoon tea at Lord's is £38 per person or £47 with a glass of champagne. Two



Ben Bloom and his father Tony in the Grade II*-listed Pavilion at Lord's with a replica of the Ashes
Picture: Juliet Hedges

Christmas themed events, including mulled wine and carol singers, cost £46 or £55 with champagne. Dates available

are February 26, March 18, April 1, May 13, October 7, December 2 and December 16.