

Restaurant review Joseph Connolly

Chicken soup at Harry's warms the cockles

The freezing weather sends Joseph off in search of something hearty. Harry Morgan offers the full range of Jewish deli food- but you may have to wait a while

Isn't it always just the way of it? You wait ages for an assistant editor and chief leader writer on a national daily newspaper to show his face, and then two of them come along at once. Last week in a restaurant I bumped into Daniel Finkelstein, the Times man, who happened to be lunching with Lord Heseltine. And the following day, who should I find myself with but his opposite number on the Daily Telegraph, Philip Johnston ... although he had pulled the short straw, as he was lunching with me. And it occurred to me, once we were settled into Harry Morgan in St John's Wood – the 'Jewish New York-style deli', as they call it – that a Finkelstein might have been rather more kosher than a Johnston ... but actually I had deliberately not invited one of my Jewish chums, you see, because they all know far too much about it, and nothing is ever as good as their grandmothers used to make – especially the chicken soup: Jewish penicillin, the cure for all that ails you. And talking of that – have you heard this one? How many Jewish grandmothers does it take to change a lightbulb? None. I'll leave it and just sit here all on my own in

the dark and go blind.

Anyhoo ... I am always surprised that St John's Wood High Street doesn't have more in the way of restaurants. Lots of luxury shops, to be sure, but food-wise we have a Chez Gerard, a Maison Blanc and the inevitable Café Rouge (which proclaimed on a A-board outside that 'Wifi is served here', whoever she is). The fluorescent orange lettering of the Harry Morgan sign sears your eyeballs at quite a distance, and the welcome is smiley and as warm. I had imagined this to be more of a restaurant than a café, but the décor is pleasant enough: black-and-white tiled floor, a flanking wall of mirror, a touch of red at the far end and vast black circular pendants looking like giant Polos (more so if Polos happened to be black). The menu serves as a checklist of all the Jewish specialities that goyim such as myself have heard of, though not necessarily eaten. Like gefilte fish balls ... which I ordered. Fried. They could have been boiled: fried sounded nicer. There is also a section devoted to 'Harry's Famous Sandwiches'. I wonder if – as their new York counterparts would certainly have been – they each were the height of



■ Joseph with Daily Telegraph assistant editor Philip Johnston

the Chrysler Building.

Philip used to live in St John's Wood, and he came here a lot because "well I was skint in those days, and this was the most affordable". Home made chicken soup he went for (someone had to) with kreplach, which are matzo balls. And just to up the matzo ante, an open and unadorned carton of Rakusen's was dumped on to the table. There were two very old ladies nearby, heavily rouged and chic of chapeaux, who were also into the chicken soup and matzos, as I felt that they might be every single day. And so how is the much vaunted soup ...? "Marvellous," said Philip. "Tastes like post-Christmas turkey soup, made with bones and packed with noodles." And my gefilte balls ... were okay. Fridge cold – but decently breadcrumb and not too overtly fishy and with a pleasingly sweet beetroot dip. I then was toying with having salt beef but rejected that idea on the grounds that I actively dislike salt

beef ... and instead I opted for the chicken schnitzel with chips. Philip was having worscht (beef salami) with eggs and two Viennas (kind of a Frankfurter). Among the optional sides there loitered 'Israel salad'. I can't imagine what it might contain: conceivably Jerusalem artichoke.

Scary Mrs T

They took forever to clear away the starter plates (the place was practically full) and we chatted about Philip's extraordinary journalistic career. He has been at the Telegraph for twenty-two years, and as chief political correspondent was a veteran of thirty Blackpool conferences. "Blair, as you might expect, was keen to mix with the Press: he gladdened everybody. Major I remember as being rather chippy". And the Iron Lady ...? "Yes ... well she didn't fraternise. I remember once being with her on an RAF VC10, which was scary enough in itself – but not as scary as she was. Basically,

she frightened the life out of me". So we sat and waited for food, pointedly not telling one another Jewish jokes. Not even the one about the chap who phoned his mother and asked how she was. "Not good," she said. "Three weeks now, and I haven't eaten a thing". "Three weeks! But that's terrible! Why haven't you eaten?" "My mouth should be full for when my son decides to call his mother?"

The wait for nosh was eased by the dangerously gluggable Chilean Merlot at £15.25 the bottle. Philip is wise and extremely witty company: three hours we were sitting in this café, so something must have been right. But not, alas, my chicken schnitzel. This was dry to the point of shredded desiccation, and barely seasoned – I think it had been hanging around under a heat lamp, despite the wait. The same was true of Philip's dish, though the three fried eggs were still just yolky enough, their yellows combining with the red of the

salami and the orange sauces to make a plateful of pop art: he finished the lot. – and I contented myself with the thin cut chips, which were crispy and good. We talked of books: his favourite authors turn out to be Austen, Dickens, Jerome and Wodehouse – and I agree with all of that, except for the first of them. Then we nibbled on a blueberry muffin – "a gift from your waiter" – and he (Philip, not the waiter) followed that up with lokshen – a sort of sweet rice and pasta thing with almond: plenty of starch and bulk for the starving hordes, few of whom one encounters in St John's Wood High Street.

I didn't realise it at first but they have an adjoining and parallel premises that is a coffee shop and a glittering and rather fab takeaway deli – which is pretty New Yorky, you have to admit. And its presence reminded me of this Jewish fellow, see, who went into a very up-market deli in Mayfair. "A pound of lox," he said. "Smoked salmon, yes," the assistant corrected him. "Fine. And a box of blintzes". "Crepes, okay" allowed the assistant. "Fine. Plus chopped liver". "Pate, yes," said the assistant. "Fine. And I want the whole lot delivered to my home in Hampstead this Saturday". "Nah," said the assistant. "On Shabbos, we don't schlep."

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

FACTFILE

HARRY MORGAN
29-31 St John's Wood High Street, NW8
Tel: 020-7722 1869
Open Mon-Fri 9am-10.30pm, Sat-Sun 10am-10.30pm.
Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆
Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆
The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆
Cost: Good value. About £50 for two course meal for two with wine.

The fried egg yellows combined with the red of the salami and the orange sausages to make a plateful of pop art

cyclones, Australia's semillion grapes really do get better with age

them to carry on and on.

As Jancis Robinson MW said: "Incarcerated in glass, they magically grow out of their green-gold, bland lemon-syrupy youth and achieve a complexity in middle age which can be rivalled only by absolutely top-quality burgundy." (From *Vines, Grapes & Wines*, published by Mitchell Beazley, £10 upwards on Amazon. A replacement is due later this year.)

I'm grateful to Corey Ryan, senior winemaker at McWilliams – which successfully combines being

both a family set-up and a great big emporium of brands – for bringing along those older bottles and explaining more about them.

"Particularly in the Hunter, it's not about the wine maker. It's about the vineyards – about trying to capture the vineyard in the bottle," he said.

The family's vines range from 10 to 80 years old and grow in a variety of soils. The Lovedale vineyard, planted in 1946, produces the flagship bottles, garlanded with awards and regarded as among Australia's

best white wines. For such class and style, the prices are remarkably reasonable. McWilliams Mount Pleasant Elizabeth 2005 is just £8.73 a bottle if you buy a case at www.tesco.com, £10 at www.houseofmenzies.com, £10.70 at www.slurp.co.uk. Even the Lovedale 2005 is below £20 – £17 at www.houseofmenzies.com £18 at www.davy.co.uk, and £18.60 at www.bbr.com – new stocks very soon.

The other iconic Hunter semillion is Tyrell's Winemakers Selection Vat 1, which is pricer – 2003 £27 at

With age, they show intriguing minerality alongside elegant citrus fruit and fine acidity

www.winelibrary.co.uk, £29.70 at The Sampler and the very fine 2004 £28.50 at www.thewinesociety.com.

Peter Lehmann's Barossa semillons are also excellent. Try Margaret Reserve 2004

£13 at www.tesco.com, 2005 £14.30 at www.nywines.co.uk where you can also buy the splendid sweet lemon-and-honey Botrytis 2009, £10.50 a half bottle.



■ Winemaker Corey Ryan