

Restaurant review Joseph Connolly

Pub called the Swiss is a true Brit at heart

It was this chalet-style tavern that gave the north London enclave its name. But it's actually an old-fashioned retreat serving proper British grub and school dinner puds

Swiss Cottage. So terribly familiar a phrase – but don't you think it perfectly extraordinary that this should be the very famous name for an urban area? I mean, can you imagine another part of London called, I don't know ... Italian Villa? Or German Castle? Weird, isn't it really? And Ye Olde Swiss Cottage does not glory in this monicker because that's where it happens to be situated, no no. The district became known as Swiss Cottage after the original Swiss Tavern that was built on this site in 1804 – then they changed it to Cottage, and the newly developed area that grew up around it adopted the name. When I was a schoolboy living very nearby I called it Twits Cottage, which for a very long time I truly did believe to be just about the funniest thing ever. And the inn wasn't owned by Swiss people, by the way, as is sometimes assumed: it's just that the chalet style of architecture was briefly fashionable at the time, and hence the nickname.

Rambling

The large and rambling building that currently sprawls there is not the original, of course: Ye Olde Swiss Cottage should more correctly be called Ye Relatively Speaking Actually Really Rather Recent Swiss Cottage, though it hardly trips off the tongue. And as a final sidebar to this – did you know that scholars of Old and Middle English insist that the word 'ye' should not be pronounced 'ye', but 'the'. Yeh well – pull the other one,

matey, it's got bells on: I don't believe that for a single moment. Who are you kidding? I wasn't born thesterday.

The pub is at the epicentre of the confluence of several motorways, and it's the very devil to get into the place. You can see it perfectly plainly at no distance at all, but you have to cross about forty roads in order to reach it, each time getting marooned on an island because the lights never bloody give you the time to complete the distance. I don't know what I was expecting of the place, quite frankly – I hadn't crossed the threshold since the 1980s, when it was briefly a Berni Inn. Anyone remember the Berni Inn? A slap-up birthday treat of a place for people who didn't get out much: rump steak, peas, chips, mushrooms as a naughty extra, Black Forest gateau and then – if the boat was to be well and truly pushed out – a schooner of Irish Coffee. The interior hasn't changed a jot – but that, in context, is not necessarily a bad thing. You walk in, and you are really very pleasantly surprised. The filthy din of buses and cars is immediately excluded (don't know quite how they manage that) and before you is a large, thick carpeted space with pleasing warm pine panelling – not tongue-and-groove plank-ing, but proper raised and fielded panels (hung with Hampstead prints, studded by brass swan-necked sconces with dappled glass shades) and a generous littering of velvet buttoned Chesterfields and armchairs. And get this: no piped music, and



■ Joseph outside Ye Olde Swiss Cottage

no machines. It is, believe it or not, an oasis of calm. Well – it is in the daytime, anyway: could be vile at night, because it's the only pub for miles around, apart from the North Star further up Finchley Road (which is vile at night). At lunchtime, though, there is just a smattering of quietly spoken elderly gen-

tle men, and the odd loud and lurking Greg Wallace. Have you ever wondered, in this city of tarted up and expensive gastropubs, where the poor old codger on a pension can go for a quiet pint in the corner? Well it's here – and the place is so vast, he'll always be sure of a seat. It's a Samuel Smith house, and

I'm told that the beer is very good indeed (I don't drink beer). My wife, though, was happy to try their Pure Brewed Lager, and liked it a lot. Later she sampled the draught wheat beer, which she said tasted just like Germolene. I tried it, and she was completely wrong about that: much more Savlon, to my palate, harbouring a forward nose of Elastoplast.

Pies

What about the food? A delight for those who hanker after good old British pub grub, unbuggered up. All the old favourites: fish and chips, toad in the hole, sausage butty, ham egg and chips and quite a few pies, some incorporating beef and various Sam Smith ales. I had a chicken and mushroom version, and my wife went for steak and kidney. They were both pretty good – one with shortcrust pastry, the other with puff – and did not have about them the radioactive heat of the microwave. Reasonable chips, peas, fresh broccoli and carrots, and each served with its own little boat of very pleasing Bisto. Eventually the whole thing collapses into warm and soggy, which is actually quite okay with this sort of thing. Here is an old fashioned pub for old fashioned people (well men, actually) who are far from minted. Old fashioned too is the range of red wine: two, one Spanish, the other Chilean, take it or leave it. I took the latter, which was reasonably drinkable, though I'm not in a lather to lay in a case of the stuff. A bloke at a nearby table made my day by ordering, to accompany his pint of best bitter, a Toad in the Hall: parp parp! Then he went back to chatting with his mates: "This bleeding EU business: we been hijacked, innit? If I wanted to be ordered about by a bunch of Krauts, I'd go and live in

Krautland, innit?". All quite blissful. The only thing missing from the atmosphere was the sweet aroma of Old Holborn roll-ups, and rich and fruity pipefuls of shag.

And then we had proper puddings! Oh yes we did! Raspberry jam sponge and custard for my wife. "Reminds me of school," she said. "It was the only decent pudding they did. Though this, I have to say, is very much better". I tasted the custard: Bird's, and quite lovely. I scoffed down a chocolate pudding (Belgian – bleeding EU again) and vanilla ice cream – Wall's, probably, and so it should have been. The pudding was as good as I have had in very superior restaurants, and all for just £2.60. The total cost of the two pies with trimmings, two half-pints of beer, two small glasses of wine and two great Billy Bunter puddings was around twenty-five quid. And so there you have it: an honest, comfortable and unspoilt boozier offering tremendous value, and (at lunchtime), no matter how improbably, truly a haven of tranquility in the middle of the M1: surely all you could ask for in an Italian Villa. German Castle. Or even good old Swiss Cottage.

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

FACTFILE

- **YE OLDE SWISS COTTAGE**
98 Finchley Road, NW3
Tel: 020-7722 3487
- Open Mon-Sat 11am-11pm.
Sun noon-10.30pm.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆
- The Feeling:
★★★★★☆☆ (in the daytime)
- Cost: Absurdly moderate. Two course meal for two with drink, about £25.

tasty street food for a vegan at this Camden curry house

The street food reminds me of friends who have travelled and come back with stories of how you can get "The most amaaaazing food just at the side of the road." This conversation invariably leads to how we in the UK "have just lost a sense of community, you know." Fortunately tonight, the street food comes without pretentious waffle and in a trio of what look like fish cakes. I try some at The Vegan's request. It tastes like upmarket Bombay mix and has a touch of pomegranate to counter the dryness. I feel like my soft shell crab, however has stolen the show. It is fresh and has a

taste of the grill, which reminds me of summer. I gobble it up, making the most of the spicy fig and prune sauce.

The mains are not served in the severely contemporary style of the starters and my rabbit comes in a huge portion and with a rich sauce – fit for a king, not just a prince. The meat is pink and tender and lovely. The sauce is definitely reminiscent of curry but I get a sense that I wasted my time with all the curries I've had where you can't differentiate what is what. I feel I may have got the better end of this vegan compromise. But The Vegan seems happy too – she's got

dhall makhani – slow-cooked black lentils and a spicy aubergine dish, with a freshly steaming roti. Her words are: "they call these side dishes", which reminds me how vegans simply love lentils.

I hate lentils, so I leave them alone, but taste the aubergine with a bit of the fresh roti that comes with my mammoth feast, feeling rather guilty. It is flavourful and has just the right kick of mustard. I imagine it being a good accompaniment to a big piece of meat from the grill.

The menu here is not strictly all Indian and there are some special imports

which border on Fusion: African prawns and Goan-style chicken are highlights.

At the end of our dinner, even though I went for the rich pickings of a meat eater and The Vegan had the tasty and rough food of the streets, we both feel full and satisfied and, strangely enough, we've managed to test both extremities of the vast menu. Namaaste passed.

FACTFILE

- **NAMAASTE KITCHEN**
Parkway, Camden Town
Tel: 020-7485 5977
- Cost: Meal for two with wine around £60.



■ The narrow but comfortable restaurant

Pictures: CM Franke