

There's no last chance for this US saloon

After a terrible lunch, The Hill offers our critic a free meal. But it's too late – you can't make amends in a competitive restaurant world

▶ The Load Of Hay – a large and famous pub on the lower slopes of Haverstock Hill for as long as anyone can remember (1863, actually – remember it?). But if, as the owner, it is your avowed intention to switch the concentration from old blokes with hats and mufflers and pipes and a half of bitter that can be teased out for hours if a decent seat by the fire has been bagged ... if the new message is that here now is no longer a pub but a brasserie with tremendous accent on the quality of the food ... then I can see, yes, that the name The Load Of Hay is maybe not quite the feel you are striving for. So, since its makeover less than a year ago, it is now called The Hill. Which is a fine enough name, except that it puts me in mind of the 1960s Sean Connery film of the same title, which was all to do with pain and punishment – the eponymous Hill being man-made and steep, the idea being that soldiers in full kit tramp up and down it in the desert heat until they drop. Well The Hill in Hampstead is not like that at all, which has to be good news all round.

Handsome from the outside – in dark mint green and golden detailing – and the interior too is very attractive and restored with care. The space is rather grand in scale, and all the original pub features gleam very comfortably. The old etched mirrors are cleverly enhanced by crystal drop sconces, the new brown leather banquettes working well with the traditional tables and chairs and chunky bronze school radiators. I was there with my wife, my son and his girlfriend. It was a Monday, and the sun was shining: we contemplated the little raised garden they have to the side of the place, but the traffic's a bit hellish so we ducked back inside. It was a Monday. Did I mention that? Maybe the reason why we were the sole diners – and maybe the reason for one or two other things that soon I shall be telling you about: but it sure as blazes doesn't excuse them. The menu is large, and there comes upon you the sneaky feeling that they are trying to be a tad too encompassing. The thrust of it is high-end American, with steaks well to the fore. Crustacea also merit a section of their own – including oysters, lobster tail and so on – the idea being either to start with them, or add them to the steak in order to form that very gross thing,

Surf and Turf. But then you spot bowls of Schezuan noodles, and you rather wonder what they are doing there ... So anyhow – my wife was going for New England clam chowder, the son a lobster bisque, the girlfriend tuna carpaccio, and I had ordered three Orkney langoustines: light, you see? Because I had earmarked the fillet steak and chunky chips for my own. The very friendly and personable waiter regretted that there could be no chunky chips “because we've run out of them”. “You mean ...?” I said, with cold suspicion, “that you buy them in ...?” “No,” he assured me, “but there's only one chef working today”. Well look – you and I know, along with the rest of the bleeding world, that in an empty restaurant one chef is probably enough to sort out some chips, no? Apparently if I insisted, they would take forty-five minutes: I didn't insist. So we sipped and chatted and waited. And then we did more of that. And then we just waited: no sign of any activity whatever. After very nearly one



■ Joseph at The Hill

Picture: Charles Connolly

whole hour (might as well have insisted on the bloody chunky chips) our cheery waiter came to tell us that there was no lobster bisque: just think – they must have spent all that time, searching high and low. Then he pushed off for a bit, and didn't return until he had another little tidbit of news for us: there were no langoustines either. So the boy rumbled for squid with onion rings, and I settled for prawns. And when, after a beast of a time, the prawns arrived, they were not just icy cold ... but off: high as a kite. How is this possible ...?

The chowder was very good, the tuna fresh and prettily presented with peas and leaves, and the squid okay: decent flavour, too chewy. And so to the mains: my fillet was a good piece of meat, properly cooked – like-wise my son's sirloin: nice, aged flavour. And the pommes frites that were served in lieu of the elusive chunky chips ...? Absolutely awful: pale, undercooked and barely tepid. And all this food too, I have to say, was a very, very long time in coming. So

the frites went back and the replacements were sort of tolerable, if you were starving, while the Bearnaise was no such thing: just cold mayo with flecks, is all. The girlfriend was very pleased with her haloumi burger (she's vegetarian) and my wife rather less so with something called an ‘overboard’ burger – not, I think, a suggestion as to where you might want to chuck it, so much as a reference to the fact that it comprised lobster, crayfish and prawns with lobster mayonnaise. After my prawn thing, I was worried, I can tell you. Well it was sort of all right, but – rather queerly – bread-crumbed. Do you want something breadcrumbed in a bun ...?

What else can I tell you ...? We ordered a further lager at some point, but it never arrived. We ordered strawberry ice cream and were served vanilla (hint for the future: strawberry pink, vanilla white). And then we were told that the wine was complimentary: word had clearly got back that my notebook by now was practi-

cally on fire. And the following day I received a message via the Ham&High that the establishment was aware that our meal had not been great, but would I care to return, when everything would be marvellous (not to say also complimentary). And this just ain't no good. If you open on a Monday, then you must be geared up: everything listed should be available (and fresh). If you consider just one chef inadequate for the preparation of chips, then you should ship in a team. Because for the punter, there can be no such thing as an ‘off’ day, because he is spending valuable leisure time and money in your brasserie, both of which are lost forever: only if you happen to be a restaurant critic is there any offer of redress (which I didn't accept, by the way). And further, you might wish to reconsider writing on your website that you offer “a first class and comprehensive culinary experience”. In a city that arguably boasts the world's finest restaurants (most of them offering wonderful lunchtime bargains), it is foolhardy.

So there it is: not a Load Of Hay, then ... but nor was it a Load Of Good.

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

FACTFILE

- **THE HILL**
94 Haverstock Hill, NW3
Tel: 020-7267 0033
- Open every weekday for lunch and dinner. Brunch Saturday to Sunday 10.30am to 2pm
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆ (nice waiter, but it took simply years)
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Cost: Pricey: about £120 for three course meal for two with wine.

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will taste. Sounds strange? Well even M&S is a believer

Planting Calendar produced by now 90-year-old Maria Thun, disciple of the man behind it all, Rudolf Steiner. If you want to try it out, buy the wine specific version, When Wine Tastes Best (£3 on Amazon).

But to return to the M&S wines. The star for me came from New Zealand growers Claire and Mike Allan, whose Huia vineyards are farmed biodynamically (Huia is one of the Bibendum Vivid wines, referred to in last week's column). Shelly Bay Tangle 2011 is equal parts pinot gris, gewurztraminer and riesling, which combine into glorious fra-

grance and crisp, classy flavours, wonderful as an aperitif or with lightly spicy southeast Asian food. It will be available shortly, online only, from M&S Wine Direct, a very reasonable £54 for six bottles.

There are plenty more pleasures, available in most stores, starting with some decent bargain Italian bottles: Popolino Rosso, £5, Reggiano Rosso, £6, Sicilian Shiraz, £6, and Vermentino, £7. Two good takes on pinot grigio are German Palataia, £8, and – the very palest pink – Italian La Prendina Estate rosé, £8.50. All are 2011 vintage.

New world delights include Villiera barrel-fermented chenin blanc 2011, South Africa, £11, Earth's End riesling 2009, New Zealand, £13, Finca Sophie malbec tempranillo 2010, Argentina, £10, and Cerro syrah 2009, Chile, £8.

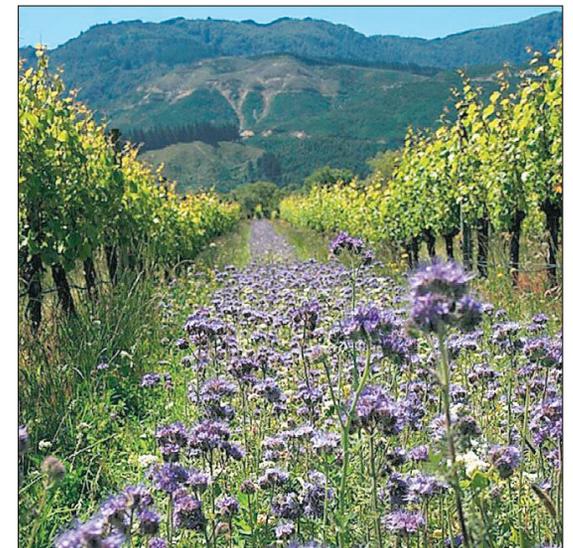
The previous evening (also a fruit day) I'd attended a small tasting of “off piste” grape varieties from Sussex independent merchant Hennings. I didn't rave over all the wines, but I suspect that a pinot meunier champagne flourished especially, while Luis Canas barrel-fermented rioja blanco 2010 (viura grape, £10) and Par Preignes

petit verdot 2009 (£9) would have shone whatever the bio calendar day (see www.henningswine.co.uk).

David Motion, owner of The (excellent) Winery in Maida Vale, is another who follows the calendar, so that's a further recommendation.

But Easter isn't looking good for wine appreciation. If you're planning to open a special bottle over the holiday weekend, perhaps you should think again. Only Easter Sunday starts to be OK (flower), with Monday moving to leaf. Fruit doesn't appear again until Wednesday April 11...

NB: Prices are pre-Budget.



■ Huia's vineyards

Picture courtesy of Huia