

# A proper taste of France – frog's legs and all

The Mill Lane Bistro not only looks the real deal but its food is too – with beautifully cooked classics oozing with flavour

» Aaaaah ... Bisto! A perfectly wonderful advertising campaign, that was – those two ragged-trousered urchins, noses upturned, eyes lost to a near-erotic rapture at the wafts of aroma emanating from a gorgeously roasted joint. And we all knew that what was being sold here was not the meat nor even its juices, but simply a thickening agent made up largely of flour, salt and colouring ... and yet still the abiding connotation was that Bisto equalled beyond temptingly delicious. I loved those tins and posters when I still was little more than a ragged-trousered urchin myself – just the sight of them made me hungry. And for many years, wide-eyed and untutored idiot that I was, I thought that 'bistro' – a new and groovy word that currently was being bandied – must either be a misprint, or else how gravy powder had to be pronounced when your mouth was greedily crammed to bursting. And even when I learned the folly of my ways, still the association continued to work its magic: Bisto equals bistro equals yummy – and never mind that no true bistro worth its salt (to say nothing of its flour and colouring) would have any truck whatever with browning or granules (if even you could get a French chef to recognise their existence).

So you see – when I saw

that there was somewhere in West Hampstead called Mill Lane Bistro, my nose was already twitching at the burgeoning bouquet, the flavours to come. So my wife and I wandered down Arkwright Road and into Lymington Road – my memories of which focus largely on The Froggnal Bookshop which was there in the 1970s. It was in this secondhand and antiquarian establishment that the lady proprietor kindly warned me off buying one of only 250 signed copies of a specially bound first edition of Ian Fleming's *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* at £20 on the grounds that very soon the bottom was sure to fall out of the market for modern first editions: I should say that that book now would quite easily fetch about £8-10,000. The shop is long demolished, and now there is an ugly block called Pulse (maybe short for Repulsive) and little mini-estates named after porcelain: Spode, Beswick, Worcester, Minton, Doulton ... and also – possibly by way of atonement for certain bygone breakages – Dresden.

When you hit West End Lane, you realise that the good people of West Hampstead will never starve: between here and Mill Lane I counted no fewer than 44 places where you could eat and drink: a few of them rather enticing, most of them rather not. But Mill Lane



■ Joseph at Mill Lane Bistro

Bistro looks to be the real deal. It used to be a wine bar, though the current restaurant has the air of having been there since the 1950s.

The décor is suitably subdued, with its claret walls and the sort of mishmash of tables, bentwood chairs, roughened brickwork and blackboards that one would quite properly expect, as well as a few more quirky touches such as dappled and glowing pendants, owing more to Daum than Tiffany, and a jumble of vintage wire-leses above the doorway.

We were greeted by Cyril, the patron – who looks very young, considering his 16 years in the business, having previously been on the management side of very up-market joints such as the Crillon in Paris and Scott's and Tom Aikens in London.

He seems proud and comfortable to now be running his own place, and presents the menu with an easy confidence. Which, thanks be,

turns out to be not misplaced: every bistro delight of old is here, and much is rightly made of the fact that fish, meat and vegetables are delivered daily. There is a set lunch at £9.95 for two courses or a couple of quid more for three, but even the carte prices are refreshingly reasonable for food on this level. So my wife was having the rather irresistibly named 'forgotten vegetable salad' which comprised blue potato (this is a good thing), purple carrot (ditto) and golden beetroot (double ditto); borlotti beans are not forgotten, but they were there too. The colours did sing. "This is a wonderful salad", she said, knee deep into the thing. "The dressing is very oily indeed, and I love it". And I was having

cuisse de grenouille – can't remember the last time I did: thighs of the frog, to be literal, but here were two entire lower portions of said amphibians, which were

tender and sweet and memorably delicious in their garlicky sauce ... so long as you were defiant in not remembering all those dissections in Biology.

My wife – sticking to the set menu – was having fish of the day – gurnard, and so I thought a glass of Viognier would go well with that. And for me a Georges Dubouef Cotes de Rhone to accompany the classic: Boeuf Bourguignon. I felt I was in the sort of place that I could trust to have prepared the Real McCoy. And so it was: a very generous bowl of tender (not too tender) perfectly trimmed chunks of beef in a deep and lustrous gravy that owed everything to very slow cooking and a lot of Burgundy, which truly was working for its keep. Some croutons, many twigs of thyme, too few potatoes (as ever in French restaurants) and though I might have appreciated the offer of something green ... here was an

admirable dish. The gurnard was adored: her sort of fish, not mine – very oily and fishy in the manner of red mullet and reminding me irresistibly of cod liver oil. No matter: she loved it.

There were three other tables taken on this Tuesday lunchtime: four jovial and elderly types, wallowing with love in their memories of Provence; a couple who were talking to Cyril about booking the whole place for a party of 45... and a table of five women, one of whose birthday it was. She had a baby. When it gurgled, she beamed. When it wailed its bloody head off, she gazed at it in open ecstasy. And then we shared a chocolate fondant... which was nearly spot-on, but not quite. The sponge was slightly overbaked with a hint of crust, while the fabulously gooey centre was not quite warm enough; the vanilla ice cream was very good. Not much criticism here, is there? All I can muster. Although they should get proper napkins – the thin little paper ones are next to useless.

This place is run with love, dedication and skill: the value is superb, and West Hampstead is lucky to have it. And so we left. Replete. And very, very content. Aaaaah ... Bisto!

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

## ► FACTFILE

### ■ MILL LANE BISTRO

77 Mill Lane, NW6  
Tel 020-7794 5577

■ Open Tuesday to Thursday noon-10pm, Friday noon-11pm, Saturday 10am-11pm, Sunday 11am-3.30pm.

■ Food: ★★★★★☆☆  
■ Service: ★★★★★☆☆  
■ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆

■ Cost: Set lunch at £9.95 for two courses, £11.95 for three. Or for three course a la carte for two with wine, a very reasonable £75-ish.

*The said amphibians were memorably delicious ... so long as you were defiant in not remembering all those dissections in Biology*

## creation of champagne – a talent certainly well worth toasting

Then came reserve wines – those kept back for a year or more and used to add structure – and finally the results of the blending, five champagnes all with a pleasant freshness and food-friendliness as well as celebration potential.

Jacquart is comparatively new among champagne houses, this year celebrating its 50th birthday. It is the big brand of a group of three co-operatives whose 2,400 hectares represent some seven

per cent of the whole champagne appellation. Brut Mosaïque, some of whose elements I tasted, is 85 per cent of sales – the other wines are the very attractive Brut Rosé, where 15 to 20 per cent red wine is added to produce a champagne which is certainly no mere pink frivolity, drier Extra Brut, vanilla-tinged Blanc de Blancs and a fine top cuvée with lingering depth, Brut de Nominée.

Floriane has been winemaker – working with those at the three

co-operatives – for 15 months after four years at Veuve Cliquot. Her background is unusual for a winemaker: there is no wine tradition (other than enjoying fine bordeaux) in her family and although French-born she "was raised in different capitals – my parents were diplomats". Her first ambition was to be a fighter pilot but, when that idea failed she turned to winemaking, studied at Reims and decided champagne would be the best choice

for the international career she planned. Watch out – she's already taking off.

■ Stockists: Brut Mosaïque, Sainsbury's, £24; Nominée, Harrods, £60. The full range is at [www.greatwesternwine.co.uk](http://www.greatwesternwine.co.uk): Brut Mosaïque £26.50, Rosé £34.50, Extra Brut £31, Blanc de Blancs £39.50, Nominée £64 – 25 per cent off six-bottle cases during April, free delivery on 12 bottles or more.



■ Floriane Ezack at the London tasting