

From the bang of a gun to a perfect banger

After observing the bullet holes left when Ruth Ellis shot dead her lover in the '50s, it's worth sampling the fare at the Magdala- even with the background music

A pub in Britain can be famous for very many things – if only, say, the pulchritude of its barmaids, the legendary lock-ins organised after hours by the (usually Irish) landlord, or simply the quality and value of its ale. The French House in Soho used to be famous for selling beer only in half pint glasses – while down the road The Coach & Horses was renowned for Norman Balon, “the rudest landlord in London”. I once stayed in an oak-beamed and cutely mulioned coaching inn in Marlow which reputedly was famous for its ghosts. They lurked, the proprietor assured me, simply all over the place. I'm not sure, frankly, whether I actually saw any or not: the lounge and breakfast room were admittedly strewn with ancient and luminously translucent perfectly motionless figures of indeterminate gender, possibly effigies, any one of whom might very easily recently have shuffled off the mortal coil, hard to tell. Other pubs revel in their connections with authors, smugglers, pirates and highwaymen, while our own Bull & Bush is celebrated in a deathless and particularly annoying music hall singalong. But also in Hampstead there stands The Magdala, and The Magdala must surely be the only pub on the planet that is famous for its bullet holes.

Yes indeed – for here it was on the evening of Easter Sunday 1955 that Ruth Ellis made her way from Tanza Road and, when her violent and philandering lover David Blakely emerged from the pub, she at point blank range emptied the chamber of a .38 Smith & Wesson: some bullets struck him from a distance of half an inch, a couple were lodged in the wall. At her tri-

al she said, “It's obvious when I shot him I intended to kill him”, and as a consequence the jury took just 14 minutes to find her guilty of murder. On 13th July of the same year, Ruth Ellis became the last woman in Britain to be hanged. “She died,” said the executioner Albert Pierrepont, “as brave as any man”. So there you have it: had this peroxide blonde night club hostess, glamour model and part-time prostitute not killed and been killed, in one would have heard of her. And The Magdala would not be famous for its bullet holes. Many will know the film *Yield To The Night*, an underrated drama starring Diana Dors, and loosely based on the Ruth Ellis case. What is maybe less known is that Ellis had a bit part in Dors's 1951 film *Lady Godiva Rides Again* (!), and the two struck up a lasting friendship (well – not that lasting, actually, as things turned out).

Tasty

So anyway – there we were 57 years later, my wife, my son and I, and rather liking the window boxes on the street crammed with vibrant bedding plants and toning well with the motley of Michelin stickers in the window: The Magdala has featured in their pub guide for the past three years running. On entering, you turn left if you're after grub and right if you simply want a quiet drink in the comfortable and sofa-heavy bar. The restaurant section is spartan, with its pine tables and wooden floor, but calming and restful nonetheless, the sunlight cascading through the leaded glass windows – a tiny terrace of just three tables winking at you from beyond. On one wall is the Evening Stand-



■ Joseph at The Magdala

Picture: Charles Connolly

ard front page from the day of Ruth Ellis's hanging, and beneath that a poster saying “Funny Fridays at The Magdala”. Some of the chairs are upholstered – others are those from a church with a box for the hymnal at the back. Avoid these: they are designed to chastise a sinner and severely punish the weak and wicked flesh.

We were greeted by a friendly Antipodean (is there any other kind?) who said that we couldn't have omelettes because they'd run out of eggs. There is a short and cheap lunch menu and a more expensive – though not much more expensive – carte. The son decided very quickly that he was having the beef and lamb pie with mash and peas. The peerless shepherd's pie at The Ivy is made from beef

and lamb: the combination is a total winner, though you rarely see it. My wife was having the Barbara duck breast with sweet potatoes and kale – and for me, Cumberland bangers and mash. Now when I order Cumberland, I always hope for the long and curly one, rather in the manner of the hairstyle of Yulia Tymoshenko, the former prime minister of Ukraine – but here was a trilogy, chubby and individual: a little bit breakfasty, but pretty damn good: with the superior glossy gravy, this was the best bangers and mash I have had in a long time. A glass of Saliente with that – and my son was working his way through a pint of Aspull cider, which he said went rather well with his pie. He did like that pie. It came in its oval baking dish and

was proper in that it had sides and a base as well as a very decent shortcrust topping: the meat was alternately chunky and minced, the flavour rich and good. As was the Barbary duck: a large, pink and extremely succulent breast with a nicely crisped skin which, alas, had been way over-salted. “But still,” my wife said, “it's really excellent”. The kale was heavy on the garlic, though not to the point of spoiling it.

I normally loathe any music in an eating place ... though here they were playing Beatles For Sale, and so naturally that was a very welcome exception. We listened with pleasure as puds were selected: a Tarte Tatin for the son (risky, I thought ... very risky) and a strawberry crush sorbet for my wife, from the very good Hampshire set-up Jude's Ices (Hey, Jude ...!). We were told that the Tarte Tatin would take 15 minutes – which it should – and that's exactly how long it did take. A nice looking thing – the apple sliced not really thinly enough, though the pastry had the right consistency and the caramelisation was good, if a little too toffee-like and tooth-jamming in places. The cold of the vanilla pod ice cream oozed very rudely into the warmth of the tart.

You may or may not be interested in this: in the Gents, there is something called an Ecoprod. Oh yes, I'm afraid so. And I quote: “This waterless urinal saves up to 100,000 litres of valuable drinking water each year!”. Which is not just too much information, but, following lunch, quite the wrong sort of information altogether. And it was only when I got home that I realised I'd forgotten to even so much as glance at the famous bloody bullet holes.

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

FACTFILE

■ THE MAGDALA

2a South Hill Park, NW3
Tel: 020-7435 2503

■ Open pub hours, but for food: Monday-Friday noon-2.30pm, 6pm-10pm. Saturday noon-10pm. Sunday noon-9.30pm.

■ Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆
■ Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆
■ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆
■ Cost: Very reasonable for such quality. About £45 for a two-course meal for two, with drink.

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complement and influence tastings in the South of France

The wine from Caryl (English) and Jan (Dutch) Panman of Chateau Rives-Blanques was a fizz: Cremant de Limoux Rosé 2008, deeply fruited and spicy, and it drew a plethora of comparisons, the most popular the racing greyhounds. But one match Caryl particularly liked was with the photo of a ballerina, chosen “because the wine does pirouettes”.

These wines, and others from the Outsiders, are available here, so you can test the pairings. Will this approach catch on? Who knows, but for those who took part the tasting was a success. “It was

well attended and drew a younger, more diverse crowd than we would have got from a standard tasting,” said Hesford.

What, I wonder, will the new owners of The Scream decide to drink as they contemplate their purchase?

Stockists: Independent merchant Leon Stolarski (www.lsfineswines.co.uk) has Felgaria 2009, £22.25; MO2 2009, £16.25; Cremant de Limoux Rosé 2008, £14.29; plus more from their makers and fellow Outsider Domaine de Calet. Outsiders on the high street: Waitrose (Chateau Combeville, Domaine Sainte Rose), Ma-

jestic (Domaine Sainte Rose). Learn more about the group at www.languedoc-outsiders.com

■ Enjoy the Outsider experience on a wine tour with Katie Jones, another member. Leicestershire lass Katie's two vineyards are in the shadow of spectacular Cathar Castles and the three-night, small group tour blends them with wine visits. Places available June 15 to 18, but there are lots of other possibilities. See www.domainejones.com for details and to buy Domaine Jones wines direct.



■ Enjoy the Outsider experience with Katie Jones who owns two vineyards in the shadow of the Cathar Castles