

# Mia – where table service is Missing In Action

A Middle Eastern restaurant with an Italian name left our critic scratching his head, and his evening didn't get much better, in part due to 11-year-old waiters

My. Oh my. That's what Mia means in Italian, but this isn't an Italian restaurant, it is Middle Eastern, so the Lord only knows what they're striving to convey here. The décor is what some might refer to as 'exotic', in that it is big, weird and alternately dull and shiny. Copper would appear to be the theme: on the façade of this great slab of a site in Swiss Cottage, right next to the Ham&High – and formerly the home of the thoroughly unlamented and utterly ridiculous Beni-hana – there are great sheets of copper with the word Mia scrawled across them. More such panels in the impeccable and very beautiful loo (easily the most attractive part of the place: you must promise me to go, even if you don't need to). Above the token vestibule there is suspended a cluster of maybe nine Tom Dixon copper globe pendants – five more of them line the bar – and this bar, it's a large and moody thing, walls and massive pillars the colours of gooey tobacco dottle and abandoned blood clot. The chairs are low, the tables on a level with your nostrils, and the lighting dim – in tune, seemingly, with many of the 11-year-old waiters.

Mia, though ... why Mia? I don't know – maybe the Lebanese have a spooky thing about Mia Farrow, do you think? That emaciated and crop-haired spooky looking waif who married Sinatra when she was 21 and he was 50 – which is a bit spooky – and later Andre Previn, who always struck me as pretty spooky too, beneath that Mr Congeniality frontage ... and then Woody Allen, who in turn very spookily married their adopted daughter – this some time after Mia had starred in Polanski's Rosemary's Baby, which is just about the spookiest thing I have ever witnessed.

My friend Max and I were looking at the menu in the bar, trying to decide whether to eat where we were sitting – though the two vast

flatscreens showing football were horribly uncondusive, and, despite the area being called a 'lounge', it was pretty severe and unloungey – or else on the 'shisha terrace'. This is a fairly functional outside area where the shisha (hookah) may be freely indulged in. There was a very intense huddle of leather-clad black-eyed young men doing just that. Not eating, not drinking, but doing just that. There is a menu of 52 flavours of tobacco that you can bubble away on, via what Max described as a "communal lung". One such option is Skittles: "Just like the famous sweets, a bonanza of fruity fun." Or the rather worryingly named Code 69, described as "sweet pleasure that will leave you with dragon-sized smoke clouds". I wondered what they were going to say there, just for a minute. The reason our choice was limited to bar or terrace was that, though there exists a cavernous lower level all tricked out as a proper restaurant, this is apparently reserved for 'functions', these often to include, according to our very charming Polish head waitress, flamenco and belly dancing. We had obviously hit a rather duller night: just we two, and a party of four oldies. But it's late-night smoking, drinking and mezzes they're going for here, I feel sure: this place is open till 3.30am – extraordinary anywhere in London, but in Swiss Cottage ... blimey! One of the oldies there I can imagine describing himself as having "travelled extensively throughout the Middle East", and as he read out the menu was pronouncing everything with a perfectly disgusting gargle – not dissimilar to the noises being made by the shishas in the gobs of the unsmiling youths on the terrace.

For that is where we found ourselves. The head waitress had said she would see that our table was prepared. Then later she told us our table had been prepared. So we went out there and every bare and laminated table was set with just cruets and an ash tray: i.e not prepared at all. A waiter – and they weren't all 11 years old, no, of course not, for this one looked to be nine-and-a-half – then dumped a plate piled high with cutlery in



■ Joseph with friend Max at Mia

front of us and said: "I'll just leave this here for you guys." Dear Lord. And it was freezing. And the gurgle from the pipes was making me sick – so we went back in for dinner in a bar because the restaurant was reserved for 'functions'. The music sounded like a drunkard whacking a sack of rice with a spade, and his lunatic woman was warbling Ay! Ay! Ay! shrilly and repeatedly while some loopy instrumentalist had completely lost his mind. Max and I, we needed a drink. I didn't order a bottle of Cristal Rose at £699.95 because I happened to have downed a couple of those just that lunchtime, so instead asked for a glass of prosecco. Max wanted a cider – Strongbow, maybe. But no – they were all as much a bonanza of fruity fun as

the tobaccos: blackcurrant cider, strawberry and lime cider ... I don't know.

And the grub ...? Yes, well – Middle Eastern, isn't it? Which tends to mean that most of the hot and cold mezzes to get you going are made of the same things as the mains: basically, if you don't like lamb and chicken, you are as stuffed as a vine leaf. But we managed to find grilled halloumi cheese (rubbery, gone cold), hummos shawarma (with minced lamb and lemon juice – Max loved it: I regard hummos as a cruel waste of time). And then there was soujok: homemade Lebanese sausages with sauteed tomato and lemon – pretty good, actually, even if the overall tang was that of a very humdrum takeaway curry. Then

we ordered lamb meshwi – skewers of grilled marinated cubes – and shawarma chicken, described as slices of marinated roasted chicken. Slightly appallingly, each dish was offered with "a choice of rice or chips". We were not asked our preference, and the food arrived with a mound of plain boiled Uncle Ben's, so far as one could tell. The lamb was lean, a bit bouncy, and rather gloomy. The chicken, not in slices but in little strips, was interestingly spiced at first, though then came an undertow of sourness, probably yogurt. The grilled red peppers were the star of the show, which is never a good sign. I was surprised to see that they had only eight red wines on the menu (no Lebanese – and certainly not the great Chateau Musar from the Bekaa Valley) but the waitress soon put me right on that score because it turned out that they didn't have only eight red wines ... they had only two. "Why ...?" I asked. "Because," I was told rather petulantly, "we have only been open for two weeks". Yes, well – with such as Majestic making deliveries often within the hour, this is just pathetic.

A waitress regarded our devastated plates. "You done ...?" she asked. I nodded. She nodded too, and then she sloped away. I must of course be quite wrong about the impression that this has left with me with, because on the website it states quite plainly that Mia delivers "five-star table service". Well my. Oh my.

■ All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website [www.josephconnolly.co.uk](http://www.josephconnolly.co.uk). Note: In last week's review of Weng Wah House, the phone number for Vanessa Clewes-Salmon's art exhibition in Perrin's Court is wrong. The correct number, if you wish to visit, is 07769 665031.

## Factfile

- MIA  
100 Avenue Road, NW3  
Tel: 020 7222 4232
- Open, Mon-Sat 6pm-3.30am (!) Sun 6pm-1am
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆☆
- Cost: Not as much as somewhere so ostensibly 'posh' as this might be. About £75 for two-course meal for two, with drink (not Cristal Rose).



## its organisers call 'the best wine-tasting contest in the world'

I'll spare you the detail of how the competition works, but it is painstaking and thorough, all wines are tasted blind and overall consistency is assured through back-up checking by a team of six very expert co-chairmen.

There are always critics of wine competitions, and some of their points are valid. But, as a wine-buyer, I'd much prefer to be directed to the single bronze medal wine which

emerged from a line-up of ten otherwise boring or worse Chilean carmeneres, or to a gold-medal white from a little-known Sicilian grape standing out in the Mediterranean wine lake. The contestants aren't just supermarket shelf fodder, there were some very fine wines entered this year – I encountered grand cru burgundy and 30-year-old vintage champagne, for example.

Being part of the IWC is an

education for all the 400-plus judges. Where else in one day can a single taster compare a dozen different Brazilian sparkling wines, nine New Zealand sweet rieslings, eight eastern European furmints, seven South African viogniers, and so on, through a 100-plus wines? If 400 palates are better honed as a result, that can only help the whole wine trade – and every wine drinker.

The results of this year's IWC were published on Tuesday (May 22), too late for recommendations here. But later this month you can try many of the gold medal winners yourself in the very same setting where they were judged. The Taste of Gold consumer tasting is at Lord's Nursery Pavilion on June 20, 6pm-9pm, tickets £20 from <http://goldmedal.internationalwinechallenge.com>.



■ Charles Metcalfe at work during the 2012 International Wine Challenge