

If I want to enter a relay, I'll join in the Games

A meal at Wagamama is a competitive sport – not all the dishes arrive together so you have to grab your partner's

So there I was in the Upper Mound Stand at Lord's for the second day of the First Test against the Windies ... although I was thinking not of cricket, but of food. This happens to me quite often. I can be doing just about anything at all, really ... and frequently my thoughts will amble in the direction of the gobby theme of grub. And whom should I then run into but Giles Coren, restaurant critic for The Times. We have been known to lunch together, and I can tell you that he thinks about food even more than I do (in fact he publishes a book this week called *How to Eat Out*) – so guess what we were talking about? He told me that the piece he had written for the following day's paper was to be a fairly comprehensive trashing of Oslo Court: not a review as such – more of an overall critique based upon multifarious youthful experiences and a further lifetime of collected legend, all this prompted by the revelation in the press that a couple of days earlier our Prime Minister and his wife had sloped off there for dinner. I must say I did find this rather odd myself: it can't be easy slipping away from Downing Street – and presumably with an armed detective in tow – and so of all the restaurants in London, why Oslo Court ...?

For those who don't know it, it's that timeless yet gorgeously 1970s number in the ground floor of the eponymous block of flats in St John's Wood ... and by happy coincidence on that day at Lord's, here was my lunch destination. And it was rather great, actually: lobster cocktail comprising a whole lobster (bit chilly, but meatily good) followed by a tender and plentiful Chateaubriand: no complaints at all – and the service just so, as ever. After the cricket was done, my host and I were roaming the gastro-



■ Joseph at the latest addition to Wagamama's chain in Heath Street, Hampstead

nomie desert that is St John's Wood High Street in search of a last glass of wine ... and the only place to go appeared to be the dread Café Rouge ...! It was rammed, so we sat at a table outside, all the better to appreciate the heady London miasma that is exhausted diesel, passive cancer and incipient drizzle. And then an (empty) wine bottle flew off the adjacent table and smashed on the pavement, just at my feet. A waitress emerged, looked at the green and dagger-like shards, said 'Oh Dear', and quickly ran away. She later reappeared to give me a bill for the wine which still we were drinking and took my money, never to return with either change or receipt. As we left, the lethal glass still glistened.

All of which reminded me why I never bother to review chain restaurants, because their attitude is largely this lamentably hopeless – with the exception of Cote, which takes things comparatively seriously. And then just last week there came another exception ... because Wagamama has come to Hampstead Village! I add the exclamation mark because I have been told that here is cause for celebration. I wouldn't know – I've

never been to a Wagamama: so I went. It is situated on the ground floor of Kingswell, that ridiculous excrement in Heath Street that was unveiled exactly forty years ago. It is the fault of Ted Levy, a local architect who, for some unplumbable reason, has a good reputation: his odd little rabbit hutches still are scattered hither and yon. Kingswell didn't work from the start, and it's been endlessly tinkered with since: stairways, levels and entrances have come and gone, and still it's an ugly and disjointed mess. Anyway: Wagamama is a mile-deep place with sage green origami paper on the walls, a hard floor and pale and twiggy chairs – a sort of Japanese take on Hans Wegner. There's severe and amber boarding to the flanking wall, a nosegay of artificial cherry blossom imprisoned within an acrylic tube ... and that's about it, really: the rest is noodles.

Loud

On this Thursday lunchtime, the front part of the restaurant was brimming with survivors from the Titanic: i.e. women and children. The women confided in one another at appalling volume as the children collectively lost their minds.

Why weren't they all at school? Or in jail, or something? My wife ordered teryaki chicken donburi, which is 'grilled juicy chicken glazed with orange teryaki sauce' with sticky rice, carrots, pea shoots, spicy onions and sesame seeds. I was having yasai yaka soba – teppan fried whole wheat noodles with egg, mushrooms, garlic, fried shallots and pickled ginger: we were sharing some skewers of beef. And then ... oh dear, oh dear: the cheery waitress said to me "The food comes when it's ready – so that's in any order, and not all at once". And here was not good news. This very lazy sort of attitude is wholly for the convenience of the kitchen, not the punter. One of the greatest arcane restaurant arts is to ensure that everyone is served fresh and hot food at the very same time – and with ingredients such as we have here, which cook in minutes, a running relay simply isn't good enough.

So the chicken thing came, and nothing else. And therefore I just had to eat half of my wife's lunch, as you will understand. Ten more minutes before the beef cubes arrived. These had echoes of trampolines, but were lean, and in a nicely gooey soy sauce. The chicken and

rice were good, the vegetables fresh and zingy bright, the sauce with a definite and welcome licorice undertow. Still no bloody noodles, though – and they're the quickest thing of all. When they did roll up, they were okay, but very dry and ultimately cold (no heated plate) and then just hugely boring. But I had my drink – plum wine! Served with fizzy water and ice. Well what can I tell you? It looked like Tizer, but tasted precisely of Delrosa Rose Hip Syrup, of long distant memory: it was just like I was teething again, and needed to be burped.

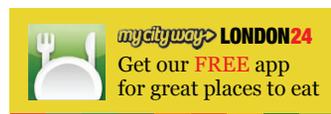
Tasteless

We thought we could do with a bit more grub, so I ordered ebi katsu: deep fried prawns in panko breadcrumbs with a chilli sauce. They came surprisingly quickly ... but tasted only of watery crunch. Dip them in the very hot chilli, and they taste of very hot chilli: either way, not really the point of prawns. And now I had that feeling that often creeps up on me when dining the (western) oriental way: I was full, but not replete: and nor did I have the sensation of actually having eaten lunch. So no pudding – but they anyway all seemed to contain coconut, fudge, ginger or yoghurt, and I hate all of those. I do realise though that I am not the target audience here – and I actually think that Wagamama will do well in the Village. It's clean, it's good value. You might like it. If you are a woman or a child. Or deaf. And if you enjoy eating during the break period in the hall of a primary school for hyperactive children – and one, moreover, which is completely out of Ritalin. But what do I know? I don't do chains. And I so remember why.

■ All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website

FACTFILE

- **WAGAMAMA**
58-62 Heath Street, NW3
Tel: 020-7433 0366
- Open Mon-Sat 11.30am-11pm. Sun 11.30am-10pm.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆☆☆
- Cost: Very reasonable, even if you're a pig. Two of you will get out for under £40, including Delrosa Rose Hip Syrup.



have to travel that far – the splendid results are available here

that's strange, remember how well the practice works in champagne or sherry.

"Our solera is getting more and more complexity year after year," says Barroul. "When we add the current vintage, the solera gains a new element without changing the style. This wine recalls the ancient times when the wine merchants would make wines having only one target: the pleasure.

So imagine my own pleasure

when, a little Googling later, I discovered that the UK importer of both growers is Bibendum in Primrose Hill. Sadly, from Boisson only the red Cotes du Rhone-Villages Cairanne 2009 (12-bottle case £168) is available, but Little James is there, at the very tempting price of £59.60 a six-bottle case. Other very desirable Saint Cosme wines are listed, too. Happy holiday memories indeed.

When I have time to return

to the same area with a wine-work theme to the trip, I'll visit the fine biodynamic growers Montirius (Berry Bros has Les Clos Vacqueyras 2009, £14.45). Also on the itinerary will be James and Joanna King's Chateau Unang, one of the best Cotes de Ventoux estates, where the organically-grown vines are set in the midst of garrigue and forest (reds from £12, The Wine Library, Noble Green Wines, Whole Foods Market

W8), and Domaine des Anges, another in the Ventoux appellation, whose wines (from £7.50) are imported by West Hampstead émigré James Bercovi, who now runs his Big Red Wine business from Suffolk.

■ Buy from: www.bibendumfinewine.com (or phone 020-7449 4120), www.bbr.com, www.winelibrary.co.uk, www.noblegreenwines.co.uk, www.bigredwine.co.uk.



■ Louis Barroul in his vineyards
Picture courtesy Chateau Saint Cosme