

Definitely a case of the more the merrier

In an era of austerity here's a pleasant surprise: a new restaurant where luxury is an everyday occurrence and affordable too

Less is more. That would appear to be the attitude of most of the new restaurants that are continuing to spring up, and particularly those in Soho and Covent Garden. You might think that this always buzzy little mantra is in tune with the austerity of the age, but I hardly think it's that. If we're all in such very dire straits, how can anyone even dream of opening a new restaurant? Apart from, quite obviously, the golden duo Jeremy King and Chris Corbin, who have three more coming soon, having only very recently scored a giant hit with The Delaunay. And, if the hungry punters are really that strapped for cash, how come they're going out to restaurants at all? No – here is nothing to do with actual economy so much as the pooled pretence of so convenient an illusion. If a place is tricked out with a scuzzy hard floor, ramshackle chairs, a smudgy menu on half a sheet of A4 offering no more than three choices, and all of them the sort of thing that a clueless and spaced-out student could bang out with ease on a Baby Belling from deep within the stew of his unspeakable digs ... well then we can all convince ourselves that we are indeed now bowing to the strictures of these new and difficult times. But here is mere lip service – not to say mouth service, once the gobbling begins afresh.

The other seductive feature of the whole 'less is more' thing is that nobody can quite understand it. Paradoxes are always appealing – and to none more than those who deliver them with half-closed eyes and a knowing

smirk: hell, they might even be winking at you and tapping the side of their noses, God damn them all to hell. But what, actually, are we to make of it? Less is more. Well in the 1980s, of course, it was plain for all to see: Cuisine Minceur, Nouvelle Cuisine – what a laugh all that was! The wonderful invention of clever restaurateurs: tiny, artfully arranged portions of colourful nothingness, their paucity deliberately emphasised by an enormous white or black square plate, and a doodle of jus. Less food: more profits. The poet Browning was the first to come up with the phrase, by the way – yes it has been hijacked by Buckminster Fuller (he of the geodesic dome) and, most famously, Mies van der Rohe ... but it was Browning who, in his 1855 poem *Andrea del Sarto*, has the Renaissance painter say "less is more" to his vacuous and unfaithful wife Lucrezia. And it is doubtful whether Signora del Sarto had a clue in blazes as to what he was on about.

Intriguing

Anyway – myself, I'm more of a more is more man. I like restaurants to be warm and comforting escapes. I like carpet. I like thick tablecloths and napkins, soft lighting and upholstered chairs (preferably with arms). I like menus with an expansive choice, and trained and subtle service to convey it. And so it was rather refreshing to hear of a new restaurant in Marylebone that was bucking the simplicity trend and pursuing such ideals: Cotidie, which is Latin for everyday. And, no, don't ask me why a restaurant aiming at the higher end with chef Bruno Barbieri (who in Italy achieved two Michelin stars) should want to call itself Everyday, because I honestly couldn't tell you. This place,



■ Joseph at Cotidie. His companion was rather camera-shy

until a couple of months ago, was Café Luc – a very decent French brasserie. Most of the décor has been retained – and wisely, because it was always rather smart: dark walnut floor and tables, black silk lampshades lined in gold, and the length of the bar covered in lots of amber glass globules – terribly reminiscent of those orange blow-up and goeey mad balloon things they used to demonstrate compulsively

I was there for lunch with Jane Mays, the fiction editor of the Daily Mail and a friend for decades; she likes to eat, has eschewed booze for the past six months (voluntarily) and, in the manner of a primitive, is convinced that to take her photograph is to remove her soul. And we agreed that the menu here is very intriguing. There are starters, salads, pastas and mains, the nature of which I think encourages you to pick

crispy speck with 'toasted bread' (as opposed to toasted pram wheels). There is also a daily changing tasting menu of five dishes for £25 – a lot of which sounded attractive, but not all: so we didn't.

I started with a very generous and gorgeously red and tender plateful of bresola with parmesan, fine olive oil and rocket: exemplary. And Jane's Sicilian salad was the prettiest plate imaginable – various leaves, fresh anchovies ("absolutely delicious!" she said) with whole peeled and roasted cherry tomatoes still with their stalks, and all arranged on the plate as an elliptical star. The home-made breads – Italian, Sicilian, Sardinian: they cover the waterfronts – were exceptionally good, as was the dipping olive oil. I was tempted by malloreddus with venaci clams – malloreddus being an unusual pasta somewhere between a shell and a tear ... though by then the word 'malodorous' had lodged in my brain, and I was sunk. So I went for fusilloni alla carbonara instead. This was intense in its

bright eggy yellow and its perfect and peppery al dente feistiness – fusilloni being stocky little spirals that do fight back a bit in order to remind you just how gutsy they are: this was a fine carbonara. And Jane simply adored her thick chunks of breast of guinea fowl with braised endive: a little bunch of lamb's lettuce had been tied with a chive into the sweetest bouquet – quite perfect for the wedding of a troll. And another thing about Jane: she picked a very good restaurant not to drink in: the cheapest bottle of red was ... £60! I know. Crazy. Why would they do that? Sixty quid – not that 'everyday' is it, matey? Very odd – because the food is quite reasonably priced.

Buttocks

No pudding, but complimentary petit fours: a florentine, a tiny nut cupcake, a twirl of this, a soupcon of that ... and a little rose-coloured and cleft-frosted mound. "Are you eating the pink buttocks?" asked Jane. "You have it ... them ..." I replied (and neither of us did: it was another of those 'malodorous' moments). So to sum up Cotidie: I'd go there more, but the wine should be less. Is what I think. More or less.

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

Factfile

■ COTIDIE

50 Marylebone High Street, W1
Tel: 020 7258 9878

■ Open Mon-Fri, noon-3.30pm, 6.30pm-11.30pm. Sat, 11am-3.30pm, 6.30pm-11.30pm. Sun, 10am-5pm.

■ Food: ★★★★★☆

■ Service: ★★★★★☆

■ The Feeling: ★★★★★☆

■ Cost: Each dish is quite reasonable, though it will mount up if you want the full three courses. Wine will entail the selling of your house.

I'm more of a more is more man. I like restaurants to be warm and comforting

at the forefront of Hamley's. The napkins are white linen and properly enormous (though there are no cloths), the tumblers pinched like a bottle of Dimple Haig, and the general air one of professionalism: the waiters are polite, able and discreet ... and the baritone of Sinatra is comfy in the background.

one course or four or anything in between, and pretty much in any order. And there are pleasing oddities among the more strictly Italian dishes such as gilthead bream and turkey. Nicely quirky starters too – a bonbon of arancini (Sicilian breadcrumb risotto balls), octopus ... and fried eggs on



intervene if you see a 'helpless' young bird on the Heath

The City of London Corporation leaves swathes of nettles and other vegetation along field margins for this and other nature conservation gains.

We are in the middle of the peak period of bird fledging. The young birds tend to leave the nest early in the morning and it can be well worth setting the alarm to see this marvellous sight. As a reminder, we often see 'helpless' young birds on the Heath at this time of year and the temptation is to 'rescue' them. Almost always that is the wrong strategy. Almost always if you move away the adult will be close by ready to resume childcare. Unless a bird is very

obviously injured or in imminent danger of injury, the best way to help the bird is to do nothing.

Dog rose is a native rose that provides delicate bouquets of whites and pinks along the country's hedgerows in late spring and summer. 'Dog' is a pig of a name, as it means 'worthless', 'inferior' or 'poor man's'. The poor dog rose was considered no match for its showy garden cousins, pampered with names like Ballerina, Amber Queen and English Elegance. But, in the non-garden context, the subtle beauty of the dog rose is plenty showy enough, thank you.

Dog rose was of practical value too; its arched branches were the arch enemy of wandering stock, who would get snagged on the hooked thorns and think twice before trying to penetrate that hedge again. Watch out for the dog rose's scarlet hips – or dragon's teeth – later in the year.

■ Go to www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/hampstead to see the Wildlife Heath Happenings page which gives an informal insight into Hampstead Heath's seasonal wildlife highlights. Follow the team on Twitter @CityCorpHeath.



■ The comma butterfly

Picture: Cindy Blaney