



■ Joseph Connolly and Max Johnson at Simply Fish in Camden Town

Picture: Polly Hancock

archival, many London shops are sweatily concerned about the unsold hillocks of tat emblazoned with the flag – but not in Camden Town. Camden Town and Covent Garden are Union Jack Central: 12 months a year, it's money in the bank.

Simply Fish is a new restaurant close to the corner where the market meets the high street, its flank adorned with a huge unmissable mural proclaiming its name in block white lettering on a bright red background that is maybe in shape intended to resemble a dorsal fin, but comes

over more as a plectrum. At the entrance is a domed glass fronted counter that looks as though it should be temptingly brimming with the freshest of fish, but has only a scattering of shrink-wrapped kippers. The space is long and narrow with the ubiquitous wall of exposed brickwork, a blond wooden floor with tables, stools and benches very similar. Yes – you heard that right, I'm afraid: nothing so straightforward as a chair in the whole of the place. The backless bench is the width of a bookshelf, and about as cosy. If it hadn't been for the fact that I was

meeting my chum Max, I might have left on account of that bench. For am I in a gymnasium? Do I look like Oliver Twist? Why am I sitting on a bloody wooden bench ...?

Max is a voyager. He owns a travel company in Canada that takes people to see polar bears. I personally am cool to the point of frigid about the prospect of seeing a polar bear, and have no doubt that such indifference is perfectly mutual. We were both rather hungry, and the menu ('fish sourced daily from sustainable Cornish fisheries') was enticing. There's a bit of a 'concept' going on, but it's not as intrusive and annoying as some I've encountered. There are four stages, the menu/placemat explains: you pick your fish (pollock, salmon, cod, plaice, sea bream, sea bass, tiger prawns) then how you would like it cooked (baked, steamed, pan fried or in tempura batter) then you decide

on a sauce (eight of these, some quite weird – such as 'citrus butter') and finally add a side dish. Or you can go the route of the 10 or so specials: a few rather glamorous (Mediterranean fish stew) and others not so (fish finger sandwich). There is also a steak and a burger for any stoned and wide-eyed Camden idiot who has fallen into the wrong restaurant altogether. Prices are very decent, and that goes too for the very short but sensible wine list: we had a South African Chenin Blanc at £17, the top price being £52 for Veuve Clicquot (not at all bad, in a restaurant).

#### Immensely pleased

So – as we grazed upon a complimentary bowl of warm peanuts – Max was opening with a smoked trout salad, which, he said, was as fresh and delicious as it was beautiful to look at: a generous bowl of brilliant green flecked with the coral-coloured trout. My Arbroath Smokies fishcakes (three, smallish) with a gribiche sauce were exemplary: warm, with a true kipper flavour, and not eked out with the blah of wood shavings as these things so often are. For mains I had gone for a special of a kilo of Cornish mussels (far less than it sounds, what with the shells and those shy little buggers who refuse to open and come out to play) in a white wine sauce and with frites ... and those frites were perfect. Which I very seldom say – but they were, quite perfect. I don't have to describe them: you know a perfect frite when you crunch one. The mussels were fleshy, the sauce pretty good – though maybe it might have been creamier. Max had cleaved to the 'concept' and was immensely pleased with his pan fried cod, pak choy with ginger and garlic and a Thai coconut dressing. I thought it all might have been a bit too much, but Max – whose appetite renders mine akin to that of an anorexic – rather thought it was not enough, in that he enjoyed it so much he would willingly have gone a further portion: "luscious", is what he said.

And then he told me of his recent travels. Because of his business,

he has amassed literally millions of Air Miles, and delights in flying first class to wherever takes his fancy. The latest was French Guyana, where, he says "there are rain forests the size of Europe. You can journey for three days on a motorised canoe through the jungle. The food there is wonderful. I ate iguana. It tastes like chicken. Of course." Then (back in Camden Town) he went a pineapple and watermelon salad with lemongrass syrup ... and here came the day's only disappointment: the waiter said they had no more. Or maybe the ingredients weren't there, who knows? But either way, Simply Fish is simply good. "I know a fish joke," said Max. "Man takes his goldfish to the vet and says 'I think he's got epilepsy'. Vet looks at the fish. 'Seems all right to me,' he says. 'Ah yes,' says the bloke, 'but I haven't taken him out of the bowl yet'."

And so, post-bench, it was time to put my spine back into some sort of order, and crookedly depart – Max to a birthday party in Munich, and I in another taxi back to Hampstead. The driver was a youngster, this time. "That roadworks," he said. "Wasn't there this morning." "Well," I assured him, "it was certainly there at lunchtime. Jubilee-vit? On my life. Straight up. God's honest truth."

■ All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website [www.josephconnolly.co.uk](http://www.josephconnolly.co.uk). Joseph Connolly's latest novel ENGLAND'S LANE is published by Quercus as a hardback and an ebook.

### FACTFILE

- **SIMPLY FISH**  
4 Inverness Street, NW1  
Tel: 020-7482 2977
- Open Sun-Tue noon-10pm. Wed-Sat noon-11pm.
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆ (apart from your spine, which feels broken)
- Cost: Very reasonable for this quality. About £65 for two courses for two with wine.

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